

Press release

17th December 2009

Opinions split on junk food ads

A national survey carried out by the Irish Heart Foundation published today (17th Dec) as part of a wider European project to improve the nutritional status of children in Europe, has revealed a major split between Ireland's key players over the marketing of junk food to children.

The key area of contention - between the economic interests of advertising/ marketing/ food industry and the health interests represented by the public health/consumer advocates, in relation to marketing of unhealthy foods - is whether it has an effect on children's eating habits and therefore contributes to obesity rates. This disagreement has caused ongoing debate on the need for restrictions on food marketing to children and what format they should take and who should develop and monitor them.

Michael O'Shea, Chief Executive of the Irish Heart Foundation, the national charity fighting heart disease and stroke, said: "I am extremely disappointed there were such differences of opinion around marketing of unhealthy foods to children. There is increasing evidence linking food marketing to unhealthy diets which is clearly reflected in the escalating problem of child obesity here in Ireland, with one in five Irish children currently overweight or obese. At the Irish Heart Foundation, we call on Government to take a clear view on how to move the issue forward as a matter of urgency."

Mr O'Shea added: "Furthermore, our charity strongly welcomes the new Broadcasting Bill and I urge the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland to immediately implement regulations which allow for a ban on the advertising of foods high in fat, sugar and salt."

Co-ordinator of the project in Ireland, Maureen Mulvihill, Health Promotion Manager, Irish Heart Foundation, also expressed surprise at the level of difference of opinion indicated by the research. She said: "The public health and consumer groups strongly stressed that the health of the child must be paramount and that marketing of unhealthy foods to children needs regulation."

According to Ms Mulvihill, the viewpoint expressed by industry stakeholders in the research, was that industry can and should regulate itself, where regulation is required. The view from industry noted in the research is that children should be exposed to 'real life', a world which includes marketing and advertising, so that they can make informed choices on food and lifestyle. Furthermore, these groups maintain that children's food choices and intake should be down to parental control.

"However a recent survey conducted by the Irish Heart Foundation and National Heart Alliance showed that parents had concerns about levels of current food marketing and that 4 out of 5 would agree to a ban on TV advertising of foods high in fat, sugar and salt^[1]", said Ms Mulvihill.

Across Europe, 160 key stakeholders in 11 EU partner countries were interviewed for their views on childhood obesity and marketing to children, under the Polmark project which was funded by the European Agency for Health and Consumers. A total of 28 stakeholders were

interviewed in Ireland and these results will be taken together with the views from around Europe and published in a report early next year. The additional study of current regulatory frameworks across Europe will also help to further inform policy makers and other key players on this debate.

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Notes:

The research report *MARKETING FOOD AND BEVERAGES TO CHILDREN - STAKEHOLDER VIEWS ON POLICY OPTIONS IN IRELAND* is available to download at <http://www.irishheart.ie> and <http://childrensfoodcampaign.net>

PolMark is the acronym for Policies on Marketing of Food and Beverages to Children.

The PolMark project is part of a pan-European examination of controls on advertising to children being conducted in 11 EU member states (other countries are the UK, France, Belgium, Sweden, Denmark, Spain, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Cyprus). *Findings from the PolMark project in other countries* is available to download at <http://www.polmarkproject.net/>.

Children and obesity in Ireland:

^[1]One in five Irish boys and girls aged 5-17 years are overweight or obese^{2,3}. In a survey undertaken in 2003-4, 15% boys and 19% of girls aged 5-12 years were reported to be overweight and 4% of boys and 9% of girls obese ² In 2007 a survey of teenagers aged 13-17 years indicates that 11% of boys and girls are overweight and 8% of boys and 6% of girls obese³. Recent data on Irish children at senior infants^[ii] level indicates that one in four of this age group is overweight or obese^[iii]. Despite different ways of measuring obesity in children, all methods used show that obesity in Irish children is increasing^[iv]

Sponsorship

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