

The industry case against advertising restrictions: An introduction to the Scragg and Hoek reviews

In 2006 a new player emerged in the debate about obesity prevention in New Zealand: the Foundation for Advertising Research (FAR). FAR was set up by Glen Wiggs after he left his position as Executive Director of the advertising industry's self-regulatory body, the Advertising Standards Authority.

Mr Wiggs now collaborates closely with Associate Professors Debra Harker and Michael Harker of the University of the Sunshine Coast in Queensland. The About Us page on the FAR website, for example, lists the Director as Glen Wiggs, in association with the Harkers. The letterhead on FAR research bulletins gives both Wellington and Noosa Heads post box numbers.

An examination of the content of the FAR website shows that the organisation has published several bulletins and reports that defend the advertising status quo against public health critics. The consistency of the stance adopted suggests FAR is an advocacy group, not a research organisation.

FOE is concerned that policy makers and opinion leaders recognise the stance FAR has taken and the background of its director, and do not view the organisation as a disinterested party in the debate over food marketing and its influence on obesity. To enable evaluation of credible research-based evidence in the obesity prevention debate, FOE commissioned reviews of a major FAR publication, "Advertising's role in diet and exercise in New Zealand and Australia: Developing a research agenda" (the Harker Report). Funders of the report included by the Food Industry Group (a New Zealand group of food manufacturers, retailers and advertisers set up in response to concerns about obesity) and McDonald's.

The reviewers are Professor Janet Hoek from the Department of Marketing at Massey University, and Associate Professor Robert Scragg from the School of Population Health, University of Auckland. Both are leading New Zealand academics in their respective fields. Together they are able to scrutinise the Harker Report from both advertising and obesity research perspectives.

Key points from the reviews include:

- the Harker Report is not "an extensive review" as it claims, and it is most unlikely it would be accepted as such by any leading health journal if publication was attempted (Scragg, pp4-5)
- the Harker Report misrepresents the main findings from eminent international reports on the relation between television advertising and children's food-related behaviour (Scragg, p6)
- the Harkers are not abreast of recent obesity research developments in New Zealand (Scragg, p7)
- the call from the Harkers for more research is a diversion from the current situation where there is ample compelling evidence to justify

interventions such as restricting the promotion of unhealthy foods and beverages (Scragg, pp8-9)

- the Harker Report's argument that fast foods and television cannot be implicated as contributors to the obesity epidemic relies on examples that are not considered in context and that cannot be accepted at face value (Hoek, p3)
- in attempting to discredit a causal role for advertising in influencing children's eating behaviours, the Harker Report relies on questionable data and overlooks important international evidence documenting consistent and significant relationships between advertising and the prevalence of overweight in children (Hoek, pp3-8)
- the Harkers' preference for industry self-regulation of advertising rather than "government interference" is not empirically based and does not meet the standard of evidence they require of health research (Hoek, pp8-11)
- the Harker Report displays inconsistent reasoning, overlooks important patterns in peer-reviewed research evidence, and applies inconsistent standards to the evidence presented (Hoek, p13).