



OPINION

Big fat tax is no gut buster

DON'T tax the Big Mac. I really object to the way every social solution seems to rely on a big new tax.

I love that governments and doctors want to make us healthy. But a junk food tax is not the answer.

Why should reducing our weight start with our wallets? There are better ways to achieve change than to make fast food more expensive for struggling families.

However, I do think it's time governments took seriously the challenge of helping the six out of 10 Australian adults, and one in four children, who are fat.

There's no such thing as fat and healthy, regardless of what people say.

The latest debate about a fast food tax comes from doctors in the Medical Journal of Australia, echoing suggestions in the Federal Government's National Preventative Health Strategy.

A fast food tax is already being tried in Taiwan and Romania. But such a one-pronged solution isn't the answer.

The Government has extraordinary powers to improve kids' health. It can legislate to limit the fat and sugar content in food — particularly food commonly eaten by kids. It can legislate against junk food advertising, and sponsorship of sport by confectionery and fast food companies.

And it can remove every damned junk food vending machine from gyms, sport club houses and schools. (Why do so many parents reward kids for playing sport with a packet of chips?)

For a start, let's make all food healthier, and let's make it easier for parents to make good choices.

Why not start by cracking down on irresponsible food labelling?

At the moment, breakfast cereals, fruit wraps or muesli bars full of sugar are still able to parade as health food, confusing well-meaning parents.

Terms like "natural" and "original" are just about meaningless, as everything is over-processed and full of hidden nasties.

And our foods are choc-full of toxic ingredients like saturated fats, trans fats, palm oil and high-fructose corn syrup, which is one of the leading

sweeteners in food, but is very hard for the body to effectively break down.

And there's the plethora of additives and preservatives, some of which are banned overseas but still available here.

It's just about impossible to find

simple, good food that isn't massively expensive. Parents want to do the right thing, but it can be very hard.

So let's concentrate on making all foods better for us to eat, rather than isolating one sector of the food industry.

Why not improve paths and parks around schools and kinders, making it easier for kids to walk every day. Yes, as VicHealth research unveiled today shows, parents are fearful about letting kids walk in their own neighbourhoods.

But better pedestrian access around shops and schools, and better bike paths, will all help.

The Federal Government can boost the amount of physical activity in schools, which will have the added bonus of helping kids learn better.

In short, if it wanted to, it could stop this problem in its tracks. But instead it's being told merely to increase taxes. Talk about punishing the victim.

Why does every social solution seem to involve taking money out of my pocket and putting it into Treasury?

I know it seems like childhood obesity is too big a problem to solve. But this isn't true.

Is Your Child Overweight? — a new book by Dr Matt Sabin from the Murdoch Childrens Institute and the Royal Children's Hospital — is full of great, practical advice for parents.

Tips include simple strategies such as decreasing portion sizes, having fast food once a month instead of once a week, making sure kids eat breakfast, get enough sleep, are more physically active, and cut down on unhealthy snacking.

"It's often a case of identifying some practical things that will lead to noticeable changes," Dr Sabin concludes.

For instance, for a 120kg 14-year-old, Dr Sabin suggests cutting out fast food for six weeks, avoiding sugary snacks and walking just 20-30 minutes a day, and she might lose 3-4kg.

This, he says, can be enough to break the vicious cycle of inactivity and weight gain.

So let's forget fads like tax on fast food, that will just make takeaways more expensive and will do nothing to change the way people live their lives.

Let's do more to change every single day to make life healthier for everyone.

'Why does every social solution seem to involve taking money out of my pocket?'

