



Association of Directors of Public Health

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We need to counter industry promotion of harmful products to protect public health

To tackle preventable illness caused by consuming harmful products we need policies that reduce their availability, affordability, and visibility, writes **Alice Wiseman**

Alice Wiseman *vice president*

Using medical professionals to help promote harmful products is one of the many tactics that big industries employ, as shown in the linked *BMJ* investigation.¹ Big industries selling unhealthy products aim to make a profit regardless of the damage caused to consumers' health. Many of these companies have millions of pounds at their disposal for marketing, advertising, and other strategies to promote their products. They have the resources to influence public perceptions and downplay the harmful effects of their products. This must change, and tobacco control gives us a blueprint for reducing the harm caused by these commercial determinants of health. The tactics used to promote and sell unhealthy food and drink follow the same playbook as the tobacco, alcohol, and gambling industries, as was shown in a recent report.²

In addition to clever marketing and branding campaigns, the tobacco industry led the way in recruiting doctors and trusted public figures to reassure smokers that smoking isn't harmful and dispute evidence to the contrary that could affect their profits. Other tactics include political lobbying, industry funded research reporting favourable results, and litigation against those who spoke out against them.

Through collaborative effort, the public health community, in partnership with the community and voluntary sector, and local and national governments have shown that industry tactics can be successfully countered in a cost effective way. For example, the most recent data show that in 2019 smoking caused 74 600 deaths in England, a decrease of 9% from 2009.³ This happened through a powerful combination of policy change and public information. However, statistics show that we cannot be complacent in our continued efforts to successfully counter industry tactics. If we can build a comprehensive approach to limiting harmful products and services that doesn't rely solely on individual behaviour change, we will see a notable reduction in the number of people living with preventable illness.

A lack of time, money, and legal resources between public health teams, local authorities, and other key partners is a major problem. National policy change to help reduce the consumption of harmful products is vital, but enforcement and follow-up action are often the responsibility of local authorities. Cross industry tactics to block legislation that would protect public health can make counter efforts against industry an uphill battle.

Over the past year, progress has been made towards creating health promoting environments, instead of simply treating the ill health that arises from consumption of harmful products. For example, the UK government implemented a ban on junk food and drink advertising on television before 9 pm and proposed restrictions on the sale of energy drinks. These measures will support everyone to make healthier choices, regardless of their background or income.^{4 5}

Meanwhile, local authorities have powers that can be highly effective in tackling unhealthy food promotion and the proliferation of fast food outlets. However, big industries have the funds to strategically undermine policies to restrict the sale of unhealthy food by, for example, launching high profile challenges to planning decisions. With increasing rates of obesity causing serious health issues, and restricting life chances, it is vital for local authorities to have the necessary tools to successfully fight planning applications for fast food outlets.

The recently announced National Planning Policy Framework⁶ includes a recommendation that local planning authorities should refuse applications for fast food outlets within walking distance of schools and other places where children congregate. This is a clear message from the government that empowers local areas to act, regardless of industry pressures.

Hounslow council has already introduced a policy that restricts advertising of inappropriate and nutritionally poor food and drink across council owned land.⁷ This type of action is happening across the country, with Cheshire East recently becoming the 20th English council to introduce restrictions on unhealthy food and drink advertising.⁸

Local public health teams are encouraging councils and partners to take other measures including developing and resourcing education packages free from industry influence; supporting evidence based campaigns to raise awareness of the harmful effects of unhealthy food and drink; and investing in staffing, training, and resourcing for Trading Standards.

Consistent communications are vital to engage the media and there needs to be collaboration with local champions, including political leaders and people directly affected. While developing awareness and support for change among the public and advocating on their behalf is crucial, it must be done in tandem with creating environments that promote health. For example, healthy food is around three

times more expensive than unhealthy choices.⁹ Without change, existing inequalities in health outcomes between rich and poor communities will continue to widen.

Protecting children and young people needs to be a particular focus so that they can grow up in healthier environments and live healthier, more productive lives—for themselves, their community, and the wider economy.

If we are to effectively tackle rates of preventable illness caused by the consumption of harmful products, we need far reaching policies that reduce the availability, affordability, and visibility of these goods. While this is already happening at a local level, thanks to a wide range of partnerships between directors of public health and other organisations, it must be adequately resourced and backed by national policy.

The Association of Directors of Public Health¹⁰ is working to support public health teams to share good practice and learn what works when responding to industry tactics to help improve outcomes for the whole population and support everyone to live healthier lives for longer.

Competing interests: AW is a board member of the Association of Directors of Public Health and the Institute of Alcohol Studies.

Provenance: commissioned, not externally reviewed.

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