

Nutrition policy favours food industry - not public health

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The national nutrition policy formulated by Labour and National-led Governments favours the food industry over public health according to new research from the University of Otago, Wellington, New Zealand..

The new findings result from a study of the 313 submissions to the Health Select Committee Inquiry into [Obesity](#) and [Type 2 Diabetes](#) held in 2006. This study compared the positions taken by submitters from the food industry and [public health](#) groups, such as the National Heart Foundation.

These positions were then compared with the 2007 Labour Government's response to the committee's recommendations and the resulting national nutrition policy.

The research focused on 19 recommendations in four areas of nutrition policy: the national obesity strategy; regulation of the food industry; regulation of marketing and advertising; and school environments.

The research found that the Labour Government supported the food industry position in 13 of the 19 recommendations, against 5 where they supported the public health position. Importantly, the Government sided with industry in rejecting key committee recommendations for front-of-pack labelling and restrictions on TV advertising of unhealthy food. Only in the area of school environments did the Labour Government agree with the public health position by requiring schools to sell and promote only healthy foods.

This school nutrition policy was subsequently overturned by the National-led Government, suggesting a strengthening of industry's influence on our national nutrition policy, says study lead author Dr Gabrielle Jenkin.

"Allowing schools to profit from the sale of unhealthy foods to their students is personally

concerning to me as a parent, and should send alarm bells to other parents," says Dr Jenkin.

She says that the public needs to consider who benefits from the current epidemic in obesity.

"The continuing trend of policy favouring the food industry is dangerous as we're now the third most obese country in the developed world according to the OECD, with 63% of adults either overweight or obese."

Like many developed nations such as the USA, New Zealand has a multi-million dollar health problem with increasing type 2 [diabetes](#), directly related to an energy-dense (high fat and high sugar) diet associated with highly processed and fast foods.

International research indicates that many governments support the commercial interests of major industrial sectors like the food industry, over strategies to improve public health. These industries are often large investors and employers, and in New Zealand, central to the economy.

However this does not take into account collateral damage, the huge future health costs for diabetes, and indirect costs due to lost productivity. The study notes that current policy tends to be based on industry self regulation, leaving the responsibility of good nutrition up to the individual, but in an environment which encourages obesity and weight gain ('obesogenic').

"It's obvious this self-regulatory model is a failure. The food industry continues to make large profits on the back of deteriorating public health, with the subsequent burden on the taxpayer to fund the health system. An effective public health strategy to address the obesogenic environment is needed if we are to control the escalating health costs," says Dr Jenkin.

The study concludes that solutions lie in regulating the food industry, regulating the advertising and marketing industries, and limiting the involvement of the [food industry](#) in policy making to ensure fair treatment of public health concerns.

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Provided by University of Otago

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