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kabbasi@bmj.com Follow Kamran on

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The *Beano*, junk food, and public health

Kamran Abbasi *editor in chief*

The *Beano* is a success. From its first issue in 1938 to today's multimedia enterprise, the comic has ridden every wave in social norms and publishing strategies. In 2018 it became the world's longest running weekly comic. Today, on beano.com, the comic is only one component of a digital offering that includes over 1000 quizzes, games, jokes, and facts majoring on trends popular among children.

It isn't hard to understand why almost 50 million children have visited beano.com, especially given its claim to be "100% safe for children." It's harder to understand why the *Beano* leans on junk food brands for its digital content. Safety, then, is in the eye of the beholder.

Claire Mulrenan, Mark Petticrew, and Harry Wallop investigate the *Beano*'s passion for quizzes about burgers, pizzas, fried chicken, and other foods that tend to be high in fat, salt, and sugar, among more understandable fare featuring cultural icons such as Harry Potter, Wednesday from the Addams Family, and Kylian Mbappe (doi:10.1136/bmj.p197).¹

The obvious question is why. The data from the surveys on beano.com feed its Beano Brain product, which creates an "immersive deep dive into the UK children's market—behaviours, attitudes, and trends." But the *Beano* says industry does not fund its junk food quizzes. If it's not about the money, it is not clear why the comic is publishing content that hardly helps to safeguard children's health.

The link between junk food and childhood obesity is well established, as are the longer term health consequences of childhood obesity. It is one reason why health services are overburdened by the erosion of, and inequalities in, baseline population health. The world's food systems are unsustainable, and the rise in obesity has gone hand in glove with a rise in hunger since 2019 (doi:10.1136/bmj.p126).²

It is just as urgent to revitalise public health and disease prevention as it is to relieve short term pressures on primary and hospital services (doi:10.1136/bmj.p239 doi:10.1136/bmj.p210 doi:10.1136/bmj.p209).³⁻⁵ Brazil's "scorched earth" experience of political damage to public health (doi:10.1136/bmj.p48),⁶ and the UK's own self-inflicted wounds to public health and to the health and care workforce (doi:10.1136/bmj.p208 doi:10.1136/bmj.p231 doi:10.1136/bmj.p234 doi:10.1136/bmj.p198 doi:10.1136/bmj.p232 doi:10.1136/bmj-2022-072872),⁷⁻¹² show that progress is hard earned but that decline is easier to orchestrate.

Brazil's response is to act: to elevate the profile and influence of public health and science by appointing a respected social scientist as its health minister. Meanwhile, in the UK a parliamentary committee is rebuking the government for overseeing the

"declining state of clinical research" (doi:10.1136/bmj.p220).¹³ The contrast is sharp.

The *Beano* can act too, as it has in the past when responding to accusations of racism or fat shaming. Inadvertently or not, the *Beano* is promoting junk food to children, to the detriment of public health, and it should stop. Today's "innocent fun" is tomorrow's health crisis.

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