“Responsibility deal” is unlikely to produce health benefits, says report

Stephen Ginn

The government’s public health “responsibility deal” is an “irresponsible” and “inadequate” response to England’s public health problems, says a new report.

The responsibility deal is at the centre of the coalition government’s health strategy. It involves partnerships between public health, commercial, and voluntary organisations to improve public health without legislation (BMJ 2011;342:d1702, doi:10.1136/bmj.d1702).

The report, from the Children’s Food Campaign, which works to improve the health of young people, criticises the deal’s pledges aimed at the food industry.

“The responsibility deal’s pledges are minor, and even these have not been universally adopted,” says a report coauthor, Charlie Powell, campaign director for the Children’s Food Campaign. “Industry commitments to them are voluntary, and they are likely to fail to improve health.”

The report lists 13 well known companies, including Birds Eye foods, Budgens supermarkets, Domino’s Pizza, and the Nando’s restaurant chain, which have failed to sign up to any of the health pledges.

Of the 90 or so companies that have signed up, 33 are listed by the report as having failed to commit to one or more of the pledges.

“A number of major fast food chains and food outlets and food catering supply companies failed to sign up to the salt reduction pledge,” says the report. These include Burger King, McDonald’s, and Pizza Hut.

Several companies have not signed up to the pledge on trans fats, including the pub chain J D Wetherspoon and Wimpy restaurants. “It is very worrying that there are still major food companies that have not agreed to remove these health-damaging substances from their products,” says the report.

Some companies have signed up to commitments that have little relevance to them. All the major supermarkets have signed up for the “out of home calorie labelling pledge.” However, “as this pledge is mainly for restaurants and fast food outlets, it is not clear what the major supermarkets will need to do to achieve it,” says the report.

The food pledges in the responsibility deal allow the industry to “appear to be helping to improve public health without having to do very much,” says the report. It questions the effectiveness of the “partnership” approach of the deal, as it says this leads to major conflicts of interest. “Any successful intervention necessarily has to affect their sales,” said Mr Powell.

Instead of the responsibility deal “we need a genuinely responsible approach to public health, including regulations to protect children from junk food marketing, and colour coded, front of pack nutrition labelling to help consumers, including children, make healthier choices,” said Mr Powell. “We do think that industry has an important role to play, but this should be in the execution of the government’s public health policies, not in their formulation.”

A spokesman for the Department of Health said that a wide ranging approach is needed to improve the nation’s health and diet. “We can go much further and faster by working with industry voluntarily to help improve public health,” he said.

The Irresponsibility Deal? is at www.sustainweb.org/resources/files/reports/The_Irresponsibility_Deal.pdf.

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