

What the fizz! A week of dealing to sugary drinks in NY and NZ

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A curious week in the world of soft drinks.

The surprising darling of public health action on soft drinks, New York, suffered a set-back when the New York state Supreme Court Appellate Division said that Bloomberg's health board had **gone too far** in stopping sales of non-diet soda and other sugar-laden beverages in containers bigger 470mL.

New York is the recent international poster child for local government public health action on obesity.



(Interestingly from a New Zealand perspective, there have been predictable caricatures of New York as a 'nanny state' in recent years. This nanny state vernacular is by far most strongly used in New York and New Zealand – try a quick Google search, and you will see.)

In contrast to the 'legal approach' to problem solving taken in NY, back in New Zealand Coca Cola has launched a feel-good [“Innovate | Information | Choices”](#) campaign. Coca Cola New Zealand are pledging:

1. Increasing the availability of smaller portion sizes.
2. Offering more low-kilojoule beverage options.
3. Providing transparent nutritional information in more places.
4. Helping get people moving by supporting physical activity programs.

The cat is among the public health pigeons! Paul McDonald (Pro Vice Chancellor, Health, Massey University) has offered praise: [“Bravo to Coca-Cola for making a commitment to take these steps”](#). Boyd Swinburn (School of Population Health, University of Auckland) has condemned it as an ounce of well-meaning in the context of the [“ton of bricks dumped by Big Food and Big Soda on the real public health policies which could reduce obesity here and around the world”](#).

With little doubt, reducing sugary drink consumption should reduce obesity rates. Moreover, it is easy – there are lots of healthier alternatives, from tap water to milk to diet drinks. Taxing sugary drinks, reducing serving sizes, and limiting availability of sugary drinks – especially to children – will almost certainly result in public health gains.

We have been looking at these issues in various modelling projects – including our own forthcoming work – and the benefits are clear. Similar action on other food groups (e.g. saturated fat, salt) is a bit trickier – but still do-able if well studied and introduced carefully. But getting rid of sugary drinks is a no-brainer.

So surely there are win-wins in here for both society and the industry? The latter can shift consumption to 'healthier alternatives', and still make profits that make the world go round. However, I side with Boyd Swinburn on the approach to achieving this – setting the new rules must be led by Government and civil society, not delegated to the beverage industry to lead.

One alarming issue, though, is the normalisation of sports and energy drinks. Ever noticed the large Powerade (a Coca Cola brand) chilly bin constantly in camera shot during All Black games? This normalisation is spilling over into kids – for example, after a 5 minute cross-country running race watch the number of kids reaching for PowerAde, a sports drink that really is only needed after 90 minutes of intense exercise.



Per 100ml, standard (i.e. “isotonic”) Powerade has 129 kJ of energy – not far short of the 180 kJ per 100 ml of standard Coca Cola. But there is much more volume in a PowerAde bottle than a Coca Cola can.

Hence my derision at Coca Cola advertising this week suggesting there will be Powerade sponsored walking events. Come on! You do not need a sports drink like Powerade to go for a walk. Maybe Coca Cola will be promoting their “Zero” Powerade product, but this

seems a difficult misnomer to market to me.

Bottom line – there is now an open acknowledgement from the soft drink industry that sugary drinks are part of the obesity problem. Good on them for eventually being upfront. Well done. Given this consensus, where is the leadership from Ministers of Health and other political leaders in the current Government to set the rules of the new game?

Missing in action?

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