



‘It’s got fruit in, so it’s good for you’



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I’m a fiend for any dessert with apples in. Strudel, pie, crumble, turnover – all of them, devoured instantly. Some years ago while perusing a dessert menu after consuming a week’s worth of calories in one sitting, it was politely suggested that I leave dessert and have something healthy.

‘It’s got fruit in it, so it’s good for you’ was my response, and it’s a line I’ve stuck to ever since. Forget the fact they’re laden with sugar, fruit is healthy and that’s my stance.

Looking at the work the British Dental Association has done analysing the contents of baby food – as reported in this month’s upfront – it’s entirely plausible someone from the industry overheard my flippant comment and thought ‘that lad’s onto something here’.

Some of those findings are truly outrageous, this one in particular: ‘*Over a quarter contained more sugar by volume than Coca Cola, with parents of infants as young as four months marketed pouches that contain the equivalent of up to 184% of the sugar levels of the soft drink, dizzying heights not seen in the 2022 research. Those pouches are without exception fruit-based mixes.*’¹

There are some serious conversations society needs to have. How on earth have they

been able to get away with this for so long? Do they take advantage of maternal and paternal instincts to give their child ‘healthy’ things – they have vegetables and fruit in, after all. Do they take advantage of parents who are simply unaware what their claims mean?

These rhetorical questions may be straightforward to answer, but the solution to the wider problem is not. Yes, the Government needs to intervene – it is patently clear voluntary action has failed – but as we have seen from the Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL), does Government intervention go far enough and fast enough to make a difference?

Maybe that’s unfair. – in March, the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) announced a record £11 million to improve children’s oral health in England through a targeted supervised toothbrushing scheme for three to five-year-olds, hot on the heels of water fluoridation in the North East. These are incredibly basic steps that can and will help, but if they’re working against baby pouches with more sugar than Coca Cola in, are they enough?

Again, the answer is straightforward. They are not. Consider, too, research from the Oral Health Foundation which revealed only one in five (19%) adults always check food labels for sugar content, with around one in six (17%) never checking sugar content at all.

That’s why the BDA’s ‘make sugar the new tobacco’ campaign is a great initiative,

calling on government to step up and force industry to do the right thing. The very same strategies that have been applied to tobacco need to be brought to bear on sugar, the campaign says. For years, the modus operandi of the tobacco world has been to lobby for their product, their business, their interests; it would be foolish to think they would do otherwise. It is naive to think the sugar industry does not attempt to assert this sort of influence too – Government legal guidance urging retailers in England to offer millions of consumers deals and discounts on minimally processed and nutritious food was dropped after a lobbying campaign by the world’s biggest ultra-processed food firms, for example.

What is obvious is trickle down initiatives and voluntary action do not go far enough. One takes years to bring about any significant change, and the other may not bring about any form of meaningful change at all. It took decades to bring about change in tobacco use, and even in today’s world there is still pushback. Sugar is beginning this journey. It has a long way to go, but it needs to get moving soon, and at a pace that will deliver change. The longer sugar is not treated like tobacco, the longer ‘it’s got fruit in it, so it’s good for you’ remains a valid marketing tool within an industry that really should be doing better. ♦

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