



Public Health Association
AUSTRALIA

Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society

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Contents

Preamble	3
Overview	4
Specific product categories	5
Marketing of alcohol.....	5
Marketing of gambling.....	5
Marketing of unhealthy food and beverages.....	6
Conclusion	6

Preamble

The Public Health Association of Australia

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) is recognised as the principal non-government organisation for public health in Australia working to promote the health and well-being of all Australians. It is the pre-eminent voice for the public's health in Australia.

The PHAA works to ensure that the public's health is improved through sustained and determined efforts of the Board, the National Office, the State and Territory Branches, the Special Interest Groups and members.

The efforts of the PHAA are enhanced by our vision for a healthy Australia and by engaging with like-minded stakeholders in order to build coalitions of interest that influence public opinion, the media, political parties and governments.

Health is a human right, a vital resource for everyday life, and key factor in sustainability. Health equity and inequity do not exist in isolation from the conditions that underpin people's health. The health status of all people is impacted by the social, cultural, political, environmental and economic determinants of health. Specific focus on these determinants is necessary to reduce the unfair and unjust effects of conditions of living that cause poor health and disease. These determinants underpin the strategic direction of the Association.

All members of the Association are committed to better health outcomes based on these principles.

Vision for a healthy population

A healthy region, a healthy nation, healthy people: living in an equitable society underpinned by a well-functioning ecosystem and a healthy environment, improving and promoting health for all.

The reduction of social and health inequities should be an over-arching goal of national policy and recognised as a key measure of our progress as a society. All public health activities and related government policy should be directed towards reducing social and health inequity nationally and, where possible, internationally.

Mission for the Public Health Association of Australia

As the leading national peak body for public health representation and advocacy, to drive better health outcomes through increased knowledge, better access and equity, evidence informed policy and effective population-based practice in public health.



Overview

PHAA welcomes the opportunity to provide input to this Inquiry. Our contribution will be limited to addressing ToR (e), *“other issues in relation to harmful or illegal content disseminated over social media, including scams, age-restricted content, child sexual abuse and violent extremist material.”*

Our concern is that ordinary advertising often constitutes "harmful content." Effective regulation of online commercial advertising should ensure:

1. **Ethical and Factual Content:**
 - Advertising must be ethical, factual, and accurate, avoiding unsubstantiated claims.
2. **Limited Scope:**
 - Focus should primarily be on providing information about availability, location, and price of products.
3. **Controlled Placement:**
 - Advertising placement should be controlled to protect vulnerable groups.
4. **Legislative Examples:**
 - Recent legislation, such as the Public Health (Tobacco and other products) Bill 2023, demonstrates comprehensive prohibitions on online advertising of harmful products, including tobacco, e-cigarettes, and nicotine products.
5. **Expansion of Definitions:**
 - Parliament should expand the statutory definition of online harm to include advertising, specifically for unhealthy products like nicotine products, alcohol, gambling, and unhealthy food and beverages.
6. **Protective Measures:**
 - Regulatory systems should:
 - Ensure online services accessed by children are free from advertising of unhealthy products.
 - Prohibit targeting vulnerable groups, especially children, with advertising for addictive products.
 - Require evidence-based health or harm warnings for legal harmful product advertising.
 - Empower online audiences to provide informed consent for receiving harmful product advertising.
7. **Data Privacy:**
 - Governments should prohibit the collection, use, and disclosure of children's data for commercial purposes.
8. **Awareness Campaigns:**
 - Governments should conduct ongoing awareness campaigns through social media to educate about the harms of harmful products.

Further reading:

- PHAA Policy position statement on [Responsible Commercial Advertising](#)

Specific product categories

Marketing of alcohol

Despite being heavily normalised across Australian society, alcohol is responsible for a substantial burden of death, disease, and injury in Australia, affecting drinkers, their families, and the broader community. Alcohol causes various harms, including personal health issues, road accidents, workplace accidents, domestic violence, and child neglect. The harm from alcohol is preventable, and reducing consumption will mitigate health and social harms in the Australian community.

However, young Australians are particularly vulnerable due to aggressive marketing strategies and easy accessibility. PHAA calls for better regulation to ensure effective, independent controls on all forms of alcohol advertising and promotion. Protecting young people from exposure to such marketing is crucial, as it normalises alcohol consumption and encourages early drinking behaviours. Additionally, restricting access to alcohol for young Australians is essential to prevent these harms.

PHAA supports proposals by specialist NGOs, including FARE and Alcohol Change Australia, to protect the community from online alcohol marketing. The unchecked promotion of alcohol and its accessibility have a profound negative impact on young Australians, exposing them to harmful behaviours and increasing the risk of developing alcohol-related problems.

Further reading:

- PHAA Policy position statement on [Prevention of harm caused by Alcohol products](#).

Marketing of gambling

Gambling causes significant harm to the physical, social, and mental health of communities, families, and individuals. The gambling industry is inadequately regulated. Urgent reform is needed, including a nationwide system with uniform standards that emphasise product safety, consumer protection, and harm prevention and minimisation. Strong regulation of gambling industry marketing strategies is essential.

In recent years, gambling product marketing and promotion have increased significantly, often using subtle tactics such as:

- Using children's playgrounds
- Children's amusement machines emulating gambling machines
- Discounted or free children's meals to promote gambling venues as 'child-friendly'

The Government was advised 12 months ago by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs inquiry into gambling – [You Win Some, You Lose More](#) – to address online promotion of gambling. Regrettably, no response has been forthcoming.

PHAA calls on the Government to act urgently to overcome political, economic, and cultural obstacles to reducing the harms caused by gambling. In line with the 2023 parliamentary committee recommendations, we propose a legislative ban on all forms of gambling marketing, including sports sponsorship and advertising.

Further reading:

- PHAA Policy position statement on [Gambling and Health](#)

Marketing of unhealthy food and beverages

Marketing of unhealthy food and beverages can significantly influence children's lifelong food choices and health. Government-led legislation is required to reduce children's exposure to such marketing across all media, including online platforms, as voluntary measures have proven insufficient.

To address this, Australian, State, and Territory governments should:

1. **Prioritise the protection of children** (aged under 18) from the marketing of unhealthy, energy-dense, nutrient-poor food and beverages.
2. **Develop a national regulatory approach** using legislation to effectively reduce children's exposure to unhealthy food and beverage marketing. This approach should:
 - Use government-endorsed criteria, like the Australian Health Council's National Interim Guide, to classify which foods and beverages can be marketed to children.
 - Cover all media and settings where children are exposed to unhealthy food marketing.
 - Include legislative provisions to protect children from all unhealthy food marketing, including online platforms, regardless of the intended audience.
 - Ensure effective complaints mechanisms and meaningful sanctions for breaches.
 - Implement an effective monitoring system.
 - Maintain transparent, independent, and accountable administrative and governance processes.
 - Provide for systematic, independent review of the regulatory scheme.
3. **Adopt and implement a comprehensive regulatory framework** that:
 - Ensures TV, radio, and cinemas are free from unhealthy food marketing from 6am to 9:30pm.
 - Prevents processed food companies from targeting children.
 - Keeps public spaces and events free from unhealthy food marketing.
 - Protects children from online marketing of unhealthy food.
 - Prohibits location-based and price-based marketing of unhealthy foods in food retail settings.
 - Prevents processed food companies from sponsoring events, including sports and festivals.

Further reading:

- PHAA Policy position statement on the [Protecting Children from the Marketing of Unhealthy Foods and Beverages](#)

Conclusion

The PHAA urges the Inquiry to strongly recommend enhanced protection for Australians, especially children, from online advertising of harmful products.

We appreciate the opportunity to submit this and welcome any further queries or requests for information.

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Chief Executive Officer