



Griffith Health Institute

Centre for Applied Health Economics

ENGAGING THE PUBLIC IN PREVENTION OF CHILDHOOD OBESITY: A CITIZENS JURY TO ADDRESS CHILDHOOD OBESITY

IS TAXATION AN APPROPRIATE STRATEGY FOR REDUCING CHILDHOOD OBESITY?

Griffith Health Institute

Population and Social Health Research Program

Report - Executive Summary

Citizens Jury to Address Childhood Obesity – May 2013

Report: Verdicts and Recommendations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Food taxation is a public health strategy that has been identified as having the potential to reduce rates of childhood obesity. A Citizens Jury was convened to explore the consumer acceptability of taxation as a strategy to prevent childhood obesity by influencing the purchasing of foods by parents. A Citizens Jury, consisting of 12-24 members of the public that are representative of the community, is a deliberative method of engaging the public in decision-making on a specific topic. The jury is asked to reach a verdict and make recommendations based on evidence provided by clinical, policy, academic and consumer experts from a wide range of perspectives. This report describes the verdicts and recommendations of a Citizens Jury on childhood obesity held in May 2013, in Brisbane, Australia.

This Citizens Jury was facilitated by Griffith University as part of a larger project funded by the Australian National Preventive Health Agency (ANPHA). The overall project is comprised of a series of sub-studies in order to inform a full economic evaluation of the impact of taxation on obesity rates in children. This research aims to identify both the cost-effectiveness and consumer acceptability of taxation strategies to reduce rates of overweight and obesity amongst children in Australia.

SAMPLE AND METHODS

Thirteen members of the public were chosen from a randomly selected pool of members of the public to participate in the Citizens Jury. During two consecutive days, evidence in the form of expert presentations, expert panel sessions and audio-visual media was provided to the jury to help them to make informed decisions regarding strategies to address childhood obesity. Jurors had the opportunity to ask questions of the expert presenters and to clarify any the evidence presented to them. The following questions on the topic of food taxation as a strategy to prevent childhood obesity were put to the jury for consideration:

1. Is taxation an appropriate strategy for reducing childhood obesity amongst 0–5 year olds?
2. Is it appropriate to tax sugar-sweetened drinks as a strategy for reducing childhood obesity?
3. Is it appropriate to tax processed meats as a strategy for reducing childhood obesity?
4. Is it appropriate to tax snack foods as a strategy for reducing childhood obesity?
5. Is it appropriate to tax food eaten away from home as a strategy for reducing childhood obesity?

OUTCOMES

The Citizens Jury deliberated on the evidence and reached verdicts on each of the five questions. The verdicts of the jury include the following:

1. Is taxation an appropriate strategy for reducing childhood obesity amongst 0–5 year olds?

Verdict: Divided Jury. The Citizens Jury was divided on whether taxation is an appropriate strategy for reducing childhood obesity. Half of the jurors were moderately positive towards taxation and the remaining jurors were unsure.

The Citizens Jury strongly recommended that the revenue from the tax on unhealthy foods and drinks be allocated to fund educational programs to prevent childhood obesity and to subsidise fresh and healthy food and drinks.

2. Is it appropriate to tax sugar-sweetened drinks as a strategy for reducing childhood obesity?

Verdict: Unanimous Support. The Citizens Jury unanimously agreed and strongly believed that a tax on sugar-sweetened drinks is an appropriate strategy for reducing childhood obesity.

There was broad agreement that a 50% tax is appropriate whilst some of the jurors believed that a 100% tax is appropriate (effectively doubling the current price). Most jurors believed that the tax on sugar-sweetened drinks should be introduced immediately with some jurors supporting an increase in the tax over a period of 4 years. The jury believed that the tax needs to be applied to

all sugar-sweetened drinks regardless of the location in which they are sold. It was unanimously agreed that labelling the sugar content of drinks is needed; and that the labelling needs to be in the form of a visual graphic, e.g. label displaying the number of teaspoons of sugar contained in the drink.

3. Is it appropriate to tax processed meats as a strategy for reducing childhood obesity?

Verdict: Majority Did Not Support. The majority of the jury did not support a tax on processed meats as a strategy for reducing childhood obesity.

4. Is it appropriate to tax snack foods as a strategy for reducing childhood obesity?

Verdict: Unanimous Did Not Support. The jury was unanimous in having a moderately strong lack of support for a tax on snack foods.

The jury felt that snack foods included both healthy and unhealthy foods. The jurors agreed that if unhealthy foods could be identified and labelled through a system such as the 'traffic light' nutritional labelling system, then they would be open to a discussion about the possibility of introducing a tax on the unhealthy snacks foods (as indicated by a 'red' traffic light food label).

5. Is it appropriate to tax food eaten away from home as a strategy for reducing childhood obesity?

Verdict: Majority Did Not Support. The Citizens Jury did not support a tax on food eaten away from home. One of the jurors moderately supported a tax on foods eaten away from home. The jurors that did not support the tax had moderate to strong views on the topic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Other recommendations developed by the jury to address childhood obesity included:

- The Citizens Jury unanimously agreed that introducing a 'traffic light' nutrition food labelling system to help consumers identify healthy food options for their children. The jury unanimously agreed that the 'green' labelled foods in the traffic light labelling system should be cheaper than, or the same price as, the 'red' labelled foods. In addition, jurors agreed that there should be a minimum amount of healthy food options ('green' label) available on the menu within each food outlet.
- The Citizens Jury recommended the clear labelling of key nutrients such as salt, sugar and fat.
- The Citizens Jury recommended increasing the availability of healthy food options for children.
- It was also recommended that in addition to taxation, other strategies such as educational initiatives should be priority.

CONCLUSIONS

The outcomes of the Citizens Jury suggest there is overwhelming representation of public support for introducing taxation of sugar-sweetened drinks and for improved labelling on all foods and drinks to enable parents to make healthier choices for their children. However, taxation on snack foods, processed meats and food eaten away from homes was not unanimously supported. The outcomes of this research are extremely important as they represent public opinion on a very complex and rather controversial topic.