Reviewer's report

Title: Towards a methodology: A survey of Australian child-oriented food products to monitor reformulation from 2009 to 2011

Version: 1  Date: 18 February 2013

Reviewer: Joop Van van Raaij

Reviewer's report:

Major Compulsory Revisions:

1. The idea behind the study is excellent: has the composition of Australian child-oriented food products changed over a period of 2 years (between 2009 and 2011). This is indeed an intriguing question in a period that a lot is expected from reformulation initiatives. Another strong point is that the authors not only focus on nutritionally improved compositions but also on nutritionally worsened compositions. My problem is a bit that the actual research question gets a little bit under snowed between other texts. I think the Background and the Discussion can be reduced by half, and should be more to the point.

2. Some methodological aspects need to be discussed in more detail. These aspects are discussed after summarizing the main aspects of the study:

The authors developed inclusion and exclusion criteria for the definition of child-oriented food products. According to these criteria a total of 157 products were identified in a single large Woolworths supermarket. Products in this baseline sample were matched to identical products for sale in 2011, by visiting a range of supermarkets, searching brand websites and direct telephone contact with manufacturers. In total 120 identical products were identified in 2011.

For each of the food products the nutrient content was used available in the Nutrient Information Panels in 2009 and 2011. Absolute and percentage change between 2009 and 2011 were calculated for each product for energy, total fat, saturated fat, sugars, sodium and fiber content per 100g. Out of the 120 products 53 showed moderate (10-25% change) or substantial (>25% change) reformulation, 22 of them were only positively reformulated, 13 only negatively, and 18 products showed positive as well as negative reformulations. Only 6% improved classification over time according to the approach of Health Kids Association. The authors conclude little overall improvement in healthiness of the child oriented food supply.

2a. In 2009 a single large Woolworths supermarket was used. Why is the same Woolworth supermarket not used in 2011? (instead of visiting a range of supermarkets, which makes comparison of the initial and the follow-up more difficult).

2b. For 37 products from 2009 there was no appropriate alternative in 2011. However, did the authors check for new products that would have been classified
as child-oriented products in 2011? Is it conceivable that some of these new products would be substantially improved versions of previous products (although not matched as identical products)? Because in that case, the efforts of industry would be underestimated.

2c. A crucial point in the study is the validity of the data from the Nutrient Information Panels. The authors should comment more critically on this. How up-to-date were the nutrient content data in 2009 and 2011? Is, for example, the Nutrient Information Panels in 2009 a valid reflection of the type of products available in 2009? And the one in 2011 a valid reflection of the products available in 2011? If not, than the actual changes in composition might be underestimated.

2d. To judge the relevance of the study it is important to know to what level these child-oriented food products contribute to the daily supply of energy and nutrients. Is this information available from food consumption surveys? Would it be possible to indicate to what level the 120 products actually contribute to for example the daily energy intake of children? (because it does matter a lot whether it would be 20% or 80%)

Discretionary Revisions:

3. Tables 1-3 are summary tables which are very helpful. On the other hand, the reader is also interested in the basic data. Maybe some more detailed information can be given in one or two annexes (maybe an Annex with the names of the 120 products found( maybe an Annex with the 53 products that show moderate and substantial reformulation, in which the products are rows and the columns are the six nutritional factors, and in the cells the percentage change?).

4. Title of manuscript should be more attractive

5. In text results section, do not repeat all figures from tables

6. Number of references can be reduced substantially

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests