

NUTRITION MESSAGES IN POPULAR TELEVISION PROGRAMS

H.N. MORTON AND C.L. SMITH

The media and particularly television are probably more powerful in determining children's food preferences than anything else including family example (National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC] 1989). To date nutritionists' concerns about the adverse effects of the media have concentrated on food advertisements directed towards children. Morton (1990) found that food advertising comprised 76% of all advertising between 1600 and 1700 hours on weekdays and that the types of food advertised did not support the selection of a healthy diet. However, overseas studies (Kaufman 1980; Earl 1986) have found that some television programs contain more negative nutrition messages than do the advertisements.

The primary data of this study were videotapes of 45 hours of three television series popular with children, broadcast early in 1990. The programs were analysed for different types of nutrition references. The total number and duration of scenes containing eating and drinking behaviour in the 45-hour sample is summarised below:

Program	Total no. of scenes	Av. no. of scenes per 30mins	Total duration of scenes *	Av. duration of scenes per 30 mins *
<u>Home and Away</u>	203	6.7	103.11	3.26
<u>Neighbours</u>	186	6.2	125.50	6.12
<u>A Country Practice</u>	124	4.1	110.25	8.22
AVERAGE	171	5.7	113.09	6.00

* Duration given in minutes

The table shows the average duration of interactions over food and drink was six minutes per half hour. Eating behaviour in the 171 scenes included the consumption of snacks and main meals in both formal and informal situations. The largest number of such scenes were of characters talking over a main meal served at a table. This is a positive finding for nutrition educators: many children miss breakfast and almost 40% of the formal main meal eating was for breakfast. In addition efforts are apparently being made to show salads, fruit and vegetables on the lunch and dinner table. Where scenes contained spoken comments on nutrition, these were coded as positive, negative or neutral according to accuracy of the information and adherence to the Dietary Guidelines. 43% of the references were coded positive. Predictably, remarks about body image and slimming were made by women. The buying, preparation and serving of food and drink by males and females was also consistent with gender role stereotypes. While males were shown buying food and drink more frequently than women, far more women were seen preparing and serving it.

Alcohol was consumed in 100 scenes with over 75% of the partakers being males over 21 years. Younger people were never shown drinking alcohol; nevertheless, alcohol is being promoted as a normal part of social intercourse in timeslots when alcohol advertising is prohibited, and brand names were clearly displayed on cans of beer. Other covert advertising of brand names included soft drinks, breakfast cereals, margarine and chips.

Overall, food and nutrition messages were found to be as frequent but more positive than implied by overseas research. With an estimated 18 million viewers for some episodes, it would be worthwhile for nutritionists to press for further improvements in the number of positive nutritional images, which could easily be made without imposing on the storyline. Nutrition educators can in any case make use of the popularity of these programs and characters, and a teaching video for this purpose is being produced by the authors.

NHMRC (1989). "Implementing the Dietary Guidelines for Australians". (AGPS: Canberra).

MORTON H.N. (1990). Comm. Health Studs. 14:153.

KAUFMAN L. (1980). J. Communication 30:37.

EARL S. (1986). Nutr. and Food Sci. 102:10.

Dept. Nutrition and Social Health, SACAE, Underdale, South Australia 5032