

Jamie Oliver urges Australia to 'pull your finger out' and implement sugar tax

Australian government rules out tax on sugary drinks, although Greens say idea should be examined

Paul Karp

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The celebrity chef Jamie Oliver has pleaded with the Australian government to “pull your finger out” and follow Britain’s lead in placing a levy on sugary drinks.

But the Australian government has ruled out introducing a tax on sugar and sugary drinks, although the Greens have said it should be considered.

Oliver, an outspoken campaigner against childhood obesity, posted a message on his Facebook page imploring other governments to follow suit.

“This is bold and brave, and this will send ripples throughout the world,” Oliver said. “If you are looking at this from other countries ... Australia, pull your finger out.

“It’s about time your government got on this.”

The UK chancellor of the exchequer, George Osborne, announced on Thursday morning in London that a sugar levy would be introduced in 2018 to help combat childhood obesity.

The tax, which will take effect in two years’ time, will apply to drinks containing more than 5g of sugar per 100ml, with a higher rate applying above 8g per 100ml, and is aimed at persuading manufacturers to reformulate their recipes to cut sugar levels.

Osborne said: “I am not prepared to look back at my time here in this parliament doing this job and say to my children’s generation, ‘I’m sorry, we knew there was a problem with sugary drinks, we knew it caused disease, but we ducked the difficult decision and we did nothing.’”

However, the Australian assistant health minister, Fiona Nash, was quick to rule out the possibility of following the UK's lead.

“The government's position at the moment is not to consider a sugar tax,” she said. “I'm not open to any discussion on that.

“I believe people have the right to make their own choices - the role of government is to make sure people are well-informed, but people have the responsibility to make their own choices when it comes to food.”

Nash said there was a “significant difference” between cigarettes and sugar. “Cigarettes kill people but you can certainly have a small amount of sugar, a reasonable, moderate amount that is going to add to a balanced diet.”

Nash accepted obesity was a significant health issue but said the government should “empower people with information to make healthy food choices and respect that they have the responsibility to make those healthy food choices”.

Nash emphasised awareness measures, including \$100m spent on healthy eating education in schools and the star rating system on food labels.

On consumption of sugar by Indigenous Australians, Nash said ensuring healthy food choices and options are available was key to changing behaviour.

“I was very encouraged when I visited the Torres Strait late last year that the supermarkets were particularly targeted in ensuring the healthy food options were cheap options for the people in those communities,” she said.

The leader of the Greens, Richard Di Natale, said taxing sugar was a “really interesting idea”.

“It's something we'll look at, I understand the arguments in both directions,” he said. “[It's] something as a nation we should look at ... then perhaps look at implementing ourselves.”

He said the Greens would monitor the evidence after the UK introduces its sugar tax and consider Mexico's example, which also taxes sugar.

The Australian Beverages Council, which represents soft-drink makers, says there is no evidence that soft-drink taxes have any impact on obesity rates.

The council's chief executive, Geoff Parker, said the tax was “yet another step in the wrong direction to end the global obesity epidemic”.

Australian Associated Press contributed to this report

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