

Policy brief: a sugary drink tax for New Zealand and 10,000-strong petition snubbed by Minister of Health and National Government

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On Tuesday 8 August, the New Zealand Beverage Guidance Panel (NZBGP) with Niki Bezzant presented a policy brief titled: *A Sugary Drink Tax for New Zealand* and a petition calling for a sugary drink tax to parliamentary representatives.¹

The policy brief outlined i) the rationale for a sugary drink tax in New Zealand, ii) a list of options on how the sugary drink tax could be structured, iii) an estimate on the amount of revenue it could generate, and iv) suggestions on how revenue could be used to prevent childhood obesity and dental caries.²

Recommendations from the policy brief were:

Also presented was an online petition³ organised by journalist Niki Bezzant that called for parliament to tax sugary drinks to reduce the burden of obesity, type 2 diabetes and dental caries in New Zealand. This was signed by approximately 10,000 New Zealanders and was supported by the New Zealand Dental Association, the National Heart Foundation, Diabetes New Zealand and Dietitians New Zealand. This petition included a clause that the revenue generated from the tax be used to promote health and nutrition education in this country.

In the lead-up to this event (July 2017), a UMR Research Poll found majority support for a sugary drink tax that used revenue

Who should pay?	Targeted at manufacturers and importers
What beverages should be taxed?	All beverages with a sugar content of >5g per 100ml
What type of a tax should it be?	A 'per unit' tax
What should the tax rate be?	Options - \$1 per litre, or - \$0.5 per litre, or - tiered at \$0.32/L for beverages with sugar content from 5 to 8g/100ml and \$0.42/L that have sugar content >8g/100ml
How much revenue could be raised?	\$65–\$100 million per year (estimated using the \$0.5 per litre tax option)
What should revenue be used for?	Programmes to address childhood obesity and make water more readily available

to fund childhood obesity prevention programmes. This was maintained at 67%, and opposition had dropped from 29% to 26% compared to a similar poll conducted in April 2016. Further, participants in the lowest annual income bracket of <\$50,000 were most supportive of a sugary drinks tax (69% support) compared to middle- and high-income earners. (\$50–\$99k=63%, ≥\$100k=68% respectively). This contradicts the suggestion that a sugary drink tax is opposed by poorer segments of the community.⁴

The *Policy Brief: A Sugary Drink Tax for New Zealand* and the 10,000-strong petition calling for a sugary drink tax were received by the Honourable Marama Fox (co-leader, Māori Party), Julie Anne Genter (health spokesperson, Green Party) and Geoff Simmons (deputy-leader, The Opportunities Party).¹

The National Government declined the invitation to receive this document and the 10,000-strong petition, which is consistent with their decision to not receive an earlier policy brief authored by the NZBGP in June 2014 titled—*Policy Brief: Options to reduce sugar sweetened beverage consumption in New Zealand*. Further, the National Government and Minister of Health declined invitations to participate in panel discussions at research symposiums that considered the evidence linking sugar and sugary drinks to obesity, type 2 diabetes and

dental caries, and solutions to address high sugar intake in 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017.⁴ Some positive steps, however, have been made to address the issue of sugary drinks on this government's watch: removing them from hospitals and encouraging schools to do the same. However, the health minister, Dr Jonathan Coleman, has repeatedly dismissed the most effective means of addressing this issue: a sugary drinks tax.

In contrast to their lack of interest in addressing the issue of excess sugar intake in the diet of New Zealanders, the National Government was keen to attend functions held by Coca-Cola. In 2011, then prime minister John Key and Gerry Brownlee visited a new Coca-Cola Amatil factory, and the party again visited in 2016, with Minister for Economic Development Stephen Joyce attending a function at a plant in Auckland.^{5,6}

It seems our current government and Minister of Health value the interests of the sugary drink industry over those of 10,000 New Zealanders and the many voices from senior leaders from the health and community sectors that contributed to the tax policy brief.

We urge the incoming government to focus on how this measure will prevent unnecessary pain and suffering of New Zealand children. We also urge readers to consider this information when it comes time to vote on election day.

Competing interests:

Nil.

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