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Barrie Margetts, Editor-in-Chief, Public Health Nutrition, replies:

All your points are all well taken, especially the last one: please see our editorial on page 169.

Vending machines in schools: to ban or not to ban?

Sir,

The publication of the UK government policy statement *Choosing Health*¹, and the recent public consultation on 'transforming school food'², have made it necessary to review the content of the machines that sell foods and drinks in schools. Geoffrey Cannon, in his 'Out of the Box' column, has reported that vending machines are to be banned from schools in England and Wales³. Unfortunately this is not the case. A conference I attended last November in Peterborough confirmed that they are here to stay⁴. The event, entitled 'Healthy Vending Machines: The Real Choice', was organised by the Health Education Trust (HET)⁵, an independent charity, and the government's Department of Health, with the support of the Automatic Vending Association (AVA)⁶, the trade association representing vending operators and their suppliers.

Joe Harvey, Director of HET, reassured the audience that, with a little help from AVA and all the food companies exhibiting at the conference, transforming automatic vending was a perfectly feasible and still very profitable 'opportunity'. The food industry and health authority representatives were assured several times that vending machines in schools have become a necessity; and that the proposed introduction of healthy foods would continue to generate considerable profits to the vending industry whilst enabling cash-strapped state comprehensive schools to retain their average annual revenue of £20 000, as demonstrated by some pilot trials. 'Healthy' vending machines were also promoted as potentially the best tools in nutrition education!

Contrary to what was stated at the conference, I remain of the opinion that 'healthy vending' is a contradiction in terms. I am sure I am not the only parent in favour of an outright ban. Because they are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, vending machines foster bad eating habits by

promoting continuous snacking to the detriment of a complete well-balanced lunch. They also encourage monotonous diets by allowing children to choose only their favourite foods repeatedly throughout the day. The vending of mineral water was approved at the conference, despite the right of every child to free drinking water, a right supported by HET itself.

Energy-dense fruit and cereal bars, widely promoted at the conference, will contribute to children's addiction to sugary foods. Fruit bars will be eaten as fresh fruit substitutes. 'Fresh' foods are perishable by definition: how much processing and how many additives are needed to make them suitable for safe prolonged storage, even with adequate refrigeration? Loss of nutrients will also occur. Speakers at the conference did at least admit that the higher cost of freshly prepared foods for vending machines would stigmatise children with little or no spending money and especially those on free school meals.

I left the conference with the impression that the whole event had been organised with the intention of appeasing food manufacturers rather than improving the nutrition and health of our children.

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DOI: 10.1079/PHN2006949

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- 5 Health Education Trust homepage, <http://www.healthedtrust.com>.
- 6 Automatic Vending Association homepage, <http://www.ava-vending.org>.

The new nutrition: have a little faith

Sir,

I send many thanks to IUNS, for its magnificent work in launching *The New Nutrition Science* initiative¹. As a former FAO/USAID/DFID food and nutrition planning