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By SPECIAL REPORT Benjamin Preiss, Henrietta Cook

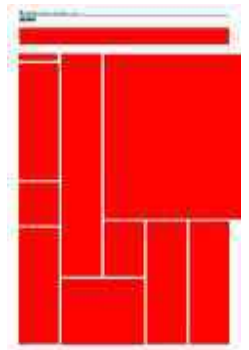
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Fast-food outlets are keen to feast on a new target

SPECIAL REPORT

Benjamin Preiss, Henrietta Cook

Every day, Julia McKay wages a small battle against the fast-food giants that have mushroomed around her home.

They are impossible to miss. The distinctive Hungry Jack's burger symbol is first to catch the eye, followed by Colonel Sanders' grinning outline at KFC next door. Then, of course, McDonald's yellow arches before you hit a 7-Eleven service station beside a Red Rooster outlet.

As McKay drives her hungry children, aged 9 and 11, along the Surf Coast Highway in Armstrong Creek, a booming suburb on Geelong's outskirts, they invariably ask her to stop for something to eat.

"They see it, and so they want it all the time," she says.

Multinational fast-food chains have long been entrenched in Victoria's established suburbs, but are now rapidly spreading in growth areas across Melbourne and regional Victoria. They often set up beside paddocks well before healthier operators have had a chance to get established – just in time for the influx of residents.

Like many of us, McKay understands the lure of fast food. It is convenient and can be cheaper than fresh meals. So, about once a week, she takes her children for a quick meal for some respite from the hectic after-school routine.

McKay believes eating at home is just about the only healthy nearby option, after her local cafe. "Other than that, it's all fast food."

The proliferation of unhealthy eateries has health experts deeply concerned. A growing body of evidence shows that living near a concentration of fast-food outlets,

along with poorer access to fresh produce, contributes to weight gain, which leads to other health conditions, including diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

Foreign governments have attempted to tackle the issue in myriad ways. Wicklow, in Ireland, has established "no fry zones" banning new fast-food or takeaway outlets within 400 metres of schools or playgrounds. Many councils across England place limits on the number of hot food takeaways to prevent oversaturation.

In Los Angeles, new fast-food restaurants were banned from low-income areas, albeit with mixed results. And in New York, mobile fruit and vegetable carts have been rolled out across parts of the city to improve access to healthy food.

A 2012 Victorian parliamentary inquiry recommended new planning rules allowing councils to limit the oversupply of fast-food outlets. A decade later, another inquiry recommended further work to integrate public health into planning rules. To date, no government has committed to curbing the proliferation of fast food on health grounds.

Melbourne University epidemiologist and biostatistician Melvin Barrientos Marzan argues the saturation of fast-food chains, especially in booming outer suburbs, is no longer tenable.

"They dominate the emerging growth areas," he says.

His latest research found a concentration of unhealthy and less healthy food outlets in urban centres and emerging growth zones, including Bendigo, Ballarat and Geelong. Unlike the inner-city, there were far fewer healthy alternatives in these growth areas.

Marzan concedes his research was imperfect because he relied on open-source data, due to the absence of official figures. He wants a public registry of fast-food restaurants, so Victorians can see how exposed they are to unhealthy food. He is among a chorus of experts urging tougher restrictions on where fast-food outlets can set up, including buffer zones around schools.

"People always say it's an individual choice, but at the end of the day, it's actually not. There are structural barriers that can hinder you from developing healthy behaviours." He says multinational food chains typically face less resistance in new developments. In more established areas, they have been met with fierce opposition, including Torquay on the Surf Coast and Tecoma in the Dandenong Ranges.

The big outlets have since moved into Torquay, including McDonald's, Subway, Domino's and KFC.

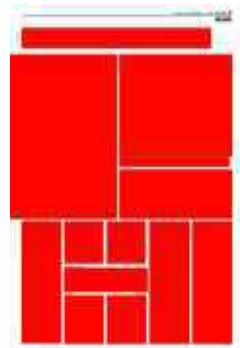
Jacqui Doyle feels like a sitting duck. The mother-of-two, who runs Cafe La Hoot near the gum tree-lined banks of the Barwon River in Winchelsea, 43 kilometres west of Geelong, says it's only a matter of time before the fast-food restaurants arrive in her town.

"They will be knocking on our door sooner or later," Doyle says, as we tuck into a lentil burger and ricotta and spinach roll hot from the cafe kitchen. "We've got the

highway, we've got constant traffic."

Half an hour's drive west of Winchelsea is the town of Colac, which has five major fast-food chains and plans approved for one more. Nearby Torquay and outer Geelong are saturated as well.

Doyle fears the arrival of fast



food in Winchelsea would hurt her business, make it harder to find staff and harm the health of her community. "There's a lot of deep-frying ... I don't think they're really health-oriented."

About 10 years ago, the Surf Coast Shire rejected an

application for a Hungry Jack's outlet in Winchelsea. But Doyle fears the big food operators will be undeterred and try again soon.

Diabetes Victoria head of prevention Jenna Van Der Velden wants an overhaul of planning laws to prioritise health. "You'll see fast-food outlets arrive in these suburbs before you even have a supermarket," she says.

Van Der Velden says there's a strong correlation between easy access to energy-dense, high-fat, high-sugar and high-salt foods and the development of type 2 diabetes, as well as other chronic conditions, including stroke and heart disease.

While type 1 diabetes is an autoimmune condition and cannot be prevented, type 2 diabetes can be linked to unhealthy eating, being overweight and inactivity. Some ethnic groups are also more predisposed to type 2 diabetes, a disease that causes too much sugar in the blood and can damage organs such as the eyes, kidneys and heart.

Van Der Velden stresses that the development of type 2 diabetes should never be solely blamed on an individual. "A lot more emphasis needs to be put on the responsibility of the environments that people live in," she says.

Deakin University public health expert Dr Cindy Needham would like councils to be given the power to reject applications for new fast-food outlets based on health concerns.

"We're expecting people to eat healthy, but we're not putting them in a position where the healthy choice is the easy choice," she says. "If you've got to walk past 10 doughnuts that cost 50 cents each, and then there's a salad that costs 20 bucks, that's not an easy choice. People are being steered towards unhealthy choices."

Needham says fast-food outlets aim to position themselves in

locations with expected population growth, often establishing themselves before the community moves in.

Surf Coast Shire Mayor Mike Bodsworth says coastal communities are concerned about the impact of multinational franchises on their unique character. He insists his council cares deeply about community health and nutrition and has strategies to promote healthy choices, but agrees that state planning regulations offer little scope to block or limit proposals for unhealthy food outlets.

"The identity of a business operator is not something that we are able to take into account," he says.

Murrindindi Shire community and development director Andrew Paxton agrees. He says there are rising rates of chronic disease, obesity and diet-related conditions, with almost 29 per cent of adults in the municipality considered overweight or obese, while poor diet remains among the leading preventable causes of ill health.

City of Greater Geelong placemaking executive director Tennille Bradley says her council works to improve education and the availability of healthy food. But figures supplied by the council reveal that it faces an uphill battle.

The average household in Greater Geelong is 1153 metres from a fast-food outlet, compared to 1294 metres from a supermarket or greengrocer.

The comparison with wealthier, inner-city suburbs is striking. In St Kilda, the average distance to a fresh food store is 400 metres, while residents in some lower-income postcodes face a 14-kilometre trek, according to a VicHealth report.

Some councils reject the notion it should be their role to regulate fast food. Glenelg Shire in the state's far west says empowering local governments to reject businesses based on food type would stifle economic growth and discourage innovation, while placing an extra burden on councils.

The Victorian government says its new five-year action plan will

help promote healthy eating and an active lifestyle. It has also legislated kilojoule labelling and has advocated for sugar labelling on infant food.

Dr Jerome Rachele has investigated how a person's body mass index (BMI) changes depending on where they live. The Victoria University researcher found an average BMI difference

of 1.31 among people living in the most socioeconomically disadvantaged neighbourhoods compared to the most advantaged. This amounts to about four kilograms for a person who is 175 centimetres tall. These findings adjust for characteristics such as age, sex, education, occupational class and income.

"We wanted to isolate the neighbourhood effect," he says.

He suspects that a saturation of fast-food restaurants and too few healthy eateries is leading to

weight gain, particularly for people living in disadvantaged postcodes in the urban fringe.

Lack of parks with exercise infrastructure, as well as a lack of opportunities to walk to the shops or public transport, are also fuelling the issue.

Andrew Brain, director of FCA Foodservice, has a clear explanation for why fast-food restaurants are built near new housing developments. The food service design consultant explains it's all about attracting investors and tenants to those new shopping centres. "It's not about choice and healthy options," he says.

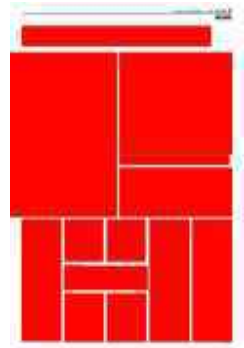
Hungry Jacks, however, says the growth of its restaurants is dictated by customer demand.

"[W]e continue to evaluate opportunities for new restaurants in various regions in Australia," a spokeswoman says.

McDonald's and KFC were also contacted for comment.

Villawood Properties executive director Rory Costelloe has watched closely as multinational chains gained a foothold in developments across the state.

Costelloe says his development in Armstrong Creek promotes healthy living through its fitness



and community club for residents.

He says his company recently sold a mixed-use commercial site and, in an unusual move, stipulated that it could not be used for major international fast-food. But Costelloe maintains fast-food operators are not necessarily just attracted to new developments – they are seeking prominent positions.

“As well as residents, they would be just as attracted to the gazillion cars that travel between Geelong and Torquay, either for work or weekends or any other time of day.”

Costelloe says developers typically consider small businesses a risk when taking on leases in commercial properties.

“The big international chains just seem to be successful all the time, unfortunately. To me, it’s a sad sign of our society that everyone relies on international fast foods, which contribute to our nation’s obesity.”

Franchising expert Richard McDonnell says that despite the rapid spread of the big chains, the businesses choose their locations carefully.

“They’re generally on the left side of the road on the way home, so they can pick you up of an evening,” he says.

McDonnell explains that landlords in new shopping centres typically offer incentives – even up to a year rent-free – to entice the big players.

He says fast-food businesses also try to establish a presence early on in new developments to snaffle prime locations before their competitors.

Back in Armstrong Creek, Julia McKay sometimes catches herself wishing her children could

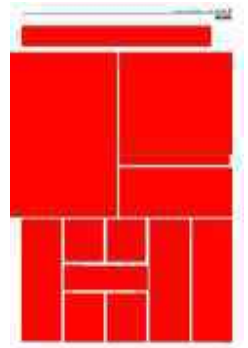
experience a time when fast food did not dominate the landscape, much like her youth in the 1980s and 1990s. So now, McKay believes it is time for councils to gain the power to rein in the rapid growth of fast-food outlets.

“Absolutely. That would be huge. They need to step in and say, ‘look, this is not good for our area and our community’,” she says. “We’ve got plenty. We don’t need any more, really.”

But she is determined to serve up healthy meals at home while fending off the fast-food onslaught outside.

And that’s a fight she is intent on winning.





Clockwise from main photo: Fast-food chains in Armstrong Creek; Jacqui Doyle runs Cafe La Hoot in Winchelsea and fears the big food operators aren't far away; the chains go into areas still being developed; Julia McKay believes there is too much fast food in her community. Photos: Alex Coppel



'They're generally on the left side of the road on the way home, so they can pick you up of an evening.'

Franchising expert Richard McDonnell on how businesses choose locations