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Transcript:

AMA President, Dr Tony Bartone, with Julia Holman, ABC Radio 'AM',
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Subjects:

Labelling Added Sugar on Food and Drinks

SABRA LANE: There could be a major change to food labelling, making it clear to consumers what products they're buying have added sugar, and how much. One idea under consideration? Photos on labels showing just how much sugar is contained in soft drinks and other beverages.

Health advocates have been campaigning for it for a long time and they argue it will help consumers reduce their sugar intake. But the beverage sector is pushing back, as Julia Holman reports.

REPORTER: When you look at the labels on drinks and food, added sugar and naturally occurring sugar are lumped together.

But a proposal being considered by State and Federal ministers could change that.

ALEXANDRA JONES: There is a lot of added sugar in our food supply, and Australians are just eating far too much of it.

REPORTER: That's Alexandra Jones, from The George Institute for Global Health.

ALEXANDRA JONES: At the moment, if you look at the nutrient panel on the back of food, you'll be able to find out how much total sugar's in the product, but we don't distinguish between what's naturally occurring - which is things like the sugar in fruit and yoghurt, say, lactose - and then what's been added by the manufacturers. And it's the dietary guidelines that tell us to avoid these added sugars.

REPORTER: Alexandra Jones also supports a proposal to display, in pictures, the amount of sugar in soft drinks and other beverages.

ALEXANDRA JONES: So this would mean that you would see, when you bought a Coke, that there would be 16 teaspoons of sugar in that product. And why they proposed this is that they found that messaging really resonates with consumers.

REPORTER: Dr Tony Bartone from the Australian Medical Association backs the proposals.

- TONY BARTONE: Information, especially in a pictorial nature, can deliver an enormous amount of information quite quickly and quite clearly. And this is obviously a good thing when it comes to making those decisions. Because some of these decisions are sometimes impulse choices in supermarket aisles, or in fast food outlets.
- REPORTER: Geoff Parker, the CEO of the Australian Beverages Council, supports the proposal to label added sugar. But he opposes the moves to put a pictorial display of sugar on soft drinks and other beverages.
- GEOFF PARKER: I guess when it comes to singling out sugar in soft drinks, for example, is misguided and it's not going to help consumers who perhaps do want to lose weight. The sugar in soft drinks is not some sort of unique contributor to obesity. Now, drinking too much sugar is not good from a weight perspective. But what we know and what government data shows and what published studies shows is that the amount of sugar and the amount of added sugar in soft drink that people have been consuming have been declining for about the last 20 years.
- REPORTER: And the sugarcane industry argues it's unclear whether changes to food labelling would actually address obesity rates. Dan Galligan is the CEO of Canegrowers.
- DAN GALLIGAN: I don't think anyone really, genuinely thinks that just sugar is the root of all evil when it comes to obesity rates. We know it's a much more complex issue than that.
- REPORTER: But Alexandra Jones from The George Institute for Global Health says it's clear that Australians need to cut back on sugar.
- ALEXANDRA JONES: So two-thirds of Australians are now overweight or obese and one in four Australian children. So, unhealthy diets are a big risk factor for this, obviously. And added sugars are a great way to get a lot of extra energy.
- REPORTER: The Australian and New Zealand Ministerial Forum on Food Regulation will make a formal decision about any changes at their upcoming meeting in November.
- SABRA LANE: Julia Holman reporting.

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