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Fitness ads need tighter rules

WILLIAM MACE



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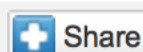
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There are calls for an inquiry into health claims made in commercials for fitness equipment after the banning of ads for the Ab Circle Pro.

The Advertising Standards Authority found the infomercial was misleading because it "portrayed unrealistic outcomes" and a disclaimer was not worded clearly enough.

It has banned the ads until improvements were made.

Clinical exercise physiologist Dr William Sukala of the Southern Cross University in Australia "debunked" the Ab Circle Pro's claims in an article for the fitness industry.

He said it was about time something was done about unethical advertising and has called for a scientific advisory board to evaluate health claims made in the campaign.

Last year, he teamed up with Fitness NZ chief executive Richard

Beddie to publicise the ad's misleading nature.

"They're misleading because they take their marketing claims out of context and trump it up," said Sukala.

"It's not illegal but it's not necessarily ethical."

Tighter regulation was needed according to Sukala, an American who has spent four years in New Zealand.

He said it was not realistic for a person to lose 4.5 kilos of stored fat in two weeks by doing the exercise, although they might be able lose that amount of weight - including water, stored carbohydrate, muscle and fat - if they also followed the suggested diet.

But he said in his study of an earlier 10 minute Ab Circle Pro ad that he had counted just six references to the low calorie diet "system" and 28 references to the Ab Circle Pro machine itself.

"These types of companies put a product up - a trojan horse that they break the door down with - but then they often recommend that you follow a reduced calorie diet and some other exercise, like walking, as well," he said.

"So you have to ask the question: are people losing weight because of the diet or because of the product?"

Paul Meier, the director of the exercise product's New Zealand distributor Brand Developers, said the advertisement was not breaking any laws and had already been revised for broadcast.

He said the complainant may well have been a business competitor of his, but would not comment any further on the misleading aspects of his commercial.

TVNZ said it believed Ab Circle Pro V2 advertorials featured during its Good Morning show were compliant with advertising standards, and were vetted by the Commercial Advertising Bureau before going to air.

TVNZ had not received any complaints about the advertorials.

Sukala said the ads were only leading customers down a misleading path, but those customers who bought in were also misleading themselves based on a desire for weight loss without any extra effort.

"As long as there are people that want to lose weight quickly there are going to be companies that will spring up to try and serve that need.

"In my opinion when it comes to companies like this, their business is money and their storefront is fitness.

"I have been doing health and fitness debunking for the past 15 to 20 years and I've seen so many companies just like Ab Circle Pro come and go - they pop up today, they make all their money and when sales start to dwindle they pack it in."

- BusinessDay.co.nz