Sweetened Research, Sugared Recommendations[1]

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In 2015, Coca Cola's chief scientist was forced to resign after revelations that the company had funded researchers to present academic papers recommending exercise to address obesity and ill health, while marginalizing the role of dietary consumption. Coca-Cola, the world's largest producer of sugary beverages, had provided millions of dollars to fund researchers to downplay the links between sugar and obesity, tooth decay and non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

[1] First published on Interpress Service, on 22 March 2017 http://www.ipsnews.net/2017/03/sweetened-research-sugared-recommendations/

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Corrupt research

This was not new. In September 2016, a New York Times article highlighted a JAMA Internal Medicine research article showing that sugar industry interests had paid scientists in the 1960s to do likewise for sugar.

The Sugar Research Foundation, now known as the Sugar Association, paid three Harvard scientists to publish a 1967 review of research chosen by the Foundation on sugar, fat and heart disease in the prestigious New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM). A total of $6500 ($48 900 in 2016 dollars) was paid to the Nutrition Department head and two colleagues including one who went on to draft the first ever US dietary guidelines.

The review article downplayed the link between sugar and heart disease while implicating saturated fats instead. Until recently, subsequent US dietary guidelines reflected these studies' findings and policy conclusions. As other countries followed, millions have shifted to more low fat, but 'high-energy (sugar)' food.

The practice continues. In June 2016, the Associated Press reported that confectionary producers had similarly funded studies claiming that children who eat what Americans call 'candy' tend to weigh less than those who do not.

A December 2016 review article in the highly respected *Annals of Internal Medicine* by researchers linked to the sugar industry claimed that the studies justifying recent reduced sugar intake guidelines are of poor quality. While the World Health Organization (WHO) and governments around the world have begun to promote and implement guidelines on sugar intake, the article claimed there is little scientific basis to expect improved health from lowering sugar intake.

Mars Inc., one of the world's leading confectioners, has broken ranks with its rivals to denounce the industry funded paper. Top researchers in the field have denounced the article for ignoring the numerous rigorous and high-quality studies finding otherwise, but doubt has been sown to good effect that perhaps sugar is not that bad after all as there is no 'scientific consensus' on the issue. Similar arguments have been invoked to try to discredit the near consensus on the human caused acceleration of global warming.

Sugar causes obesity

Sugar, corn syrup and most sweeteners are minor sources of an essential category of nutrients or dietary energy called carbohydrates, measured in terms of calories or joules. Most of our carbohydrate intake comes from food staples such as rice, potatoes and wheat. Sugars are simpler carbohydrates, absorbed by the body at faster and higher rates.

When we consume too much carbohydrate-rich food, the excess carbohydrates not used by the body, e.g., for physical activity, is converted and transported by the blood vessels as glucose (known as blood sugar), and then transformed into fats. Hence, too much carbohydrate – including sugar – in our diets can lead to obesity and diabetes.

The best way to avoid obesity is by limiting calorie intake, i.e., the amount of food we eat, and increasing energy expenditure through physical activity. The publicity given to such research sponsored by the food and beverages industry to absolve sugar is part of a larger public relations effort to mislead the public around the world.

Diets are important in determining the quality of life, especially health. Good health reduces health costs and also raises productivity. Balanced food intake in moderation, dietary diversity and physical activity all contribute to health and wellness.

Developing country menace

Health problems stemming from carbohydrates, especially sugar over-consumption are correlated to growing overweight, obesity and non-communicable diseases, such as diabetes, throughout the world. In the second half of the twentieth century, these were popularly associated with affluence and the US.

Since the turn of the century, the problem has spread to many other 'middle income countries', initially especially in Mexico and Central America. These changes are increasingly associated with lifestyle, behavioural and cultural changes associated with urbanization, mechanization and changes in the nature of work.

In Asia, Malaysia has the highest share of overweight and obese people. In 2014, 43.8% of men and 48.6% of women over 20 years of age were overweight, of whom many were obese. Diabetes rates among adults have also increased from 11.6% in 2006 to 15.2% in 2011 and 17.9% in 2015. Recent removal of the sugar subsidy seems to have had little impact on sugar consumption, underscoring the need for non-market interventions.

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Earlier articles on hungerexplained.org related to the topic:

- Scientific research under the influence of private interests, 2016
- The impact of the 2007-2008 food security crisis: the uncounted social and economic cost of resilience, 2016
- Reducing sugar consumption, overweight and related diseases, 2015
- Price policies can help promote healthier diets: the example of Europe, 2015
- In the US, the industrial food and agriculture sector spent hundreds of millions on communication to influence the media, consumers and policy. What about in Europe?, 2015