

Do big food companies control nutrition research?

June 23 2015, by Beth Skwarecki

Thank You!

Abbott Nutrition
Alliance for Potato Research & Education
Almond Board of California
Biofortis Clinical Research
Cargill, Inc.
The Coca-Cola Company
Council for Responsible Nutrition
The Dannon Company
DSM Nutritional Products, LLC
DuPont Nutrition and Health
Egg Nutrition Center
General Mills Bell Institute of Health & Nutrition
Herbalife Nutrition Institute
The Hillshire Brands Company
Kellogg Company
Kraft Foods Group
Mars Chocolate North America
McCormick Science Institute
McDonald's
Mondelez International, Inc
Monsanto Company
National Cattlemen's Beef Association
National Dairy Council
Nestlé Nutrition Institute
PepsiCo
Pfizer, Inc.
Pharmavite, LLC
The Sugar Association
Tate & Lyle
Unilever North America

The “Sustaining Sponsors” thanked at the 2015 ASN meeting

Corporations cozying up to researchers create massive conflicts of interest. It's an old story when the villain is a pharmaceutical company. But food companies need to make money too, and what better way than funding and publicizing research on their products?

I had plenty of time to think about this issue while I was at the American Society for Nutrition conference this spring. Here's what I wrote on Lifehacker:

As I write this, I'm at the American Society of Nutrition conference, listening to scientific presentations on nutrition—and the number of corporate logos is astounding. Not just the biggies like Pepsi and Kellogg, but specialized groups too: if there's a study on cranberry juice, for example, you can bet there will be an Ocean Spray logo on the acknowledgements slide.

Corporate funding doesn't mean the study is bogus, but topics with good funding are more likely to be investigated (or in other words, funding doesn't always bias the answer, but does buy the question.) To use another example from this conference, take the news that adding eggs to your salad makes the vitamins in the vegetables more available to your body. Amazing, right? It's actually not news: fat-soluble vitamins are more available to your body when you eat them with fat. The same researcher who did this work has shown the same effect with other foods, including oils. So why are eggs getting the press? Take a look at the funder (which most of the news articles aren't reporting): the American Egg Board.

Public health lawyer Michele Simon has been thinking about it too. [Last week she released a report](#) (written with the Alliance for Natural Health) detailing the American Society for Nutrition's reliance on corporate sponsors. I caught up with her by phone:

In this report, why are you focusing on ASN

specifically? How do they compare to other groups?

My previous report was a deeper analysis of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics [a trade group for nutritionists in the US] and that organization is even more influenced by the food industry. That was a good example of what happens when you form these kinds of cozy relationships with the junk food industry. It's not just dietitians, but also nutrition researchers that have conflicts. The ASN and its members' research form the foundations of the nutrition advice that comes from other professions, like dietitians, and even the federal government.

There have been exposes here and there of individuals in the ASN, such as David Allison, who was called out on ABC News for his connections to Coca-Cola and PepsiCo, but I wanted to look at how this membership trade organization sets a tone. When you go to your professional annual meeting and you see sponsorships by the likes of Coca-Cola, what does that tell you as a researcher? That it's perfectly acceptable to say yes when, the next day, the Coca-Cola scientific officer says "let's team up on some research."

Of course not all ASN members have conflicts, far from it, but ASN is normalizing the idea that it's OK to have science influenced by corporations that have a direct economic stake in the outcome of that science.

In the medical field, it seems like researchers are very up-front about their funding: there's always a disclosure statement. When I went to the ASN conference, I didn't always see disclosures attached to research. Do nutrition scientists need to get better about disclosures?

The disclosure trend originally came out of the deep conflicts of the pharmaceutical industry and medical science, and that has somewhat filtered into the food realm. But I've had conversations with academics about the role of disclosures and it's really become this feel-good thing. It's an expected thing to do. 'Yes, we disclose our conflicts.' But that doesn't make it OK.

Obviously it's better than nothing, knowing that Coca-Cola funded that study that says soda doesn't cause obesity. OK, now I can completely discount that study. But you [the consumer] may not have seen this disclosure. There are many examples of industry funded research that gets widely reported in the media without disclosures.

I've noticed the same thing too: things that were presented at the ASN conference, you see them in the news the next day without any mention of sponsors. I got to thinking, and I'm curious about your thoughts on this—and not even Coca-Cola, but something like Ocean Spray was sponsoring a ton, and the Egg Board—

Yes, and the National Dairy Council. It all flies under the radar of most media outlets.

So lots of stories make the news about the antioxidants in cranberries being good for you and I'm thinking, you know, it's probably not just cranberries, but Ocean Spray is the one paying for it, so we hear a lot about cranberries. It's almost like a

selection publication bias, even aside from whether the research is right or not.

Those companies that have a stake in positioning themselves as healthy are going to be the ones funding the research to prove their point, and they're ones that have the money. Obviously a company like Ocean Spray or Welch's is really well positioned to fund research versus, say the peach council or the cherry board.

You might get the exact same or even better nutritional value by consuming whole fruit, but those sectors don't have the same funding sources, and they're not going to make as much money as Welch's from slapping a claim on a 100% sugar vehicle. It's a joke to me to even be talking about juice as a source of antioxidants given the sugar content, which likely negates any alleged health benefit.

So we're talking about corporate ties and funding and so on. Now, there's funding and there's influence, and they're related but not necessarily the same thing. Can you explain a little about how these companies are influencing the ASN or how we know the scope of their influence?

I would agree that giving money isn't necessarily bad, but it does raise serious concerns, for example, around buying access. One of the types sponsorships that companies can purchase, is \$35,000 for the hospitality suites. So that is a perfect opportunity to socialize with researchers and we can assume that if a company is sponsoring it, they're sending their representatives, and there are probably other corporate representatives showing up at the hospitality suite because they know that's where they can cozy up to researchers. Relationship building is politics 101. When

you form relationships with people, then they don't think of you as evil, and then it's normal to engage in all kinds of dealings with them.

But the more direct influence comes from the two examples of policy positions I explained in the report. One, against the FDA's proposal to require added sugar to be listed on the Nutrition Facts panel, completely flies in the face of every other health organization that has supported that proposal, and just common sense: why shouldn't consumers have additional information about the sugar that's in their food?

And then the example, even worse to me, was a complete defense of processed food, again flying in the face of nutrition science and common sense, and, even consumer trends. So it can't be an accident that the sugar association and the processed [food industry](#) are major funders of ASN when they come out with positions like that that are just antithetical to basic science.

Since we're talking about conflicts of interest here, can you tell me about yourself? How do the findings in this report relate to the kind of work you do for clients?

I'm an independent consultant, and I've done this work for almost 20 years in various ways, collaborating with different organizations. For this report, it was a collaboration with the Alliance for Natural Health, and they said we want to expose this group's industry ties. I said that sounds like a good idea, I wanted to do that too, so we teamed up to do it together.

Everything I've done is a complete open book at eatdrinkpolitics.com. Every single report I've done, everything I've written is either as a freelance writer (sometimes for no pay) or in in collaboration with

nonprofits or law firms or just from funders who support my work. I do a variety of things, including public speaking. I'm kind of unusual in that no one else really does what I do, so I've been creative in how I do this work, but it's all there.

What inspired you to do this work?

I got inspired by Marion Nestle's work, a few years before her seminal book [Food Politics](#) came out. She was writing about the influence of the meat and dairy industries on the dietary guidelines and I thought that's exciting because I had recently adopted a vegetarian diet and I hadn't seen anybody else writing about that. So I decided to follow in her footsteps and then I broadened my horizons from there.

To me, public health law is really about pushing for changes in law and policy that make healthy eating easier. Unfortunately the general public doesn't understand some basic public health principles. Many people think, "it's just up to individuals and parents to make better choices" without an understanding of how much our environment influences our behavior. It's hard to educate people about how to eat right when they leave their house and all they find is McDonald's and the corner liquor store.

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