

Big Food and public health research

August 14 2015, by Travis Saunders, Phd, Msc, Cep

As an obesity researcher I have publicly grappled with the ethics of working with the food industry here on Obesity Panacea for several years. Originally I had always leaned more towards the view of engaging with industry. While I felt that people like Michele Simon and Yoni Freedhoff made good arguments against engaging with Big Food, I felt it was possible that the positive aspects of engagement (primarily in the form of money for research or other programs that might not be possible otherwise) outweighed their potential to do harm.

However, over the past few years I've gradually been pulled toward the views held by Yoni and Michele for 2 reasons:

- Big Food seems willing to say or do just about anything to promote their own interests.
- Funding [public health](#) projects (including research) probably helps Big Food avoid meaningful regulation.

Take this [interview](#) with Coca Cola President for North America Katie Bayne, which has been critiqued by Marion Nestle and Yoni Freedhoff previously.

In the interview, Ms Bayne claims that there is no such thing as an empty calorie:

A calorie is a calorie. What our drinks offer is hydration. That's essential to the human body. We offer great taste and benefits whether it's an uplift or carbohydrates or energy. We don't believe in empty calories. We believe

in hydration.

She weighs in on the evidence linking sugar sweetened beverages and obesity (emphasis mine):

There is no scientific evidence that connects sugary beverages to obesity. If you look at the data, you can see that during the same period obesity was rising, sugar intake from beverages was decreasing. Between 1999 and 2010, sugars from soda consumption decreased by 39%, but the percentage of obese children increased by 7%, and 13% for adults.

Note that she didn't say that the research isn't air-tight, or that some questions remain, which would be true. She said there is "no scientific evidence", which can be easily disproved by heading back to [my previous post](#) which surveyed the rather large body of evidence on this exact topic.

She goes on:

Q: Shouldn't teens drink less cola and more milk and water?

A: Teens should get a healthy diet through food and beverage choices throughout the day.

Q: How much Coke should a kid drink a day?

A: We don't make recommendations on what kids should drink. But a 12-ounce can of Coke has 140 calories, the same as a lunch-box-size bag of pretzels.

Finally, here is her son's post-workout hydration regimen:

If my son has lacrosse practice for three hours, we go straight to

McDonald's and buy a 32-ounce Powerade.

Now if Big Food executives were able to respond to these sorts of questions as a reasonable, rational person, then I would continue to agree that partnerships with industry are the way to go. But it's tough to maintain that view after seeing the above interview and others like it, that suggest to me that the food industry has no goal other than profit. I don't think that any reasonable person could honestly say that there is no such thing as an empty calorie (especially in the context of obesity), or duck a simple question asking whether it's healthier for kids to drink more water and less soda.

My other big problem is with an issue related to [corporate social responsibility campaigns](#). In short, a primary goal of these campaigns is to prevent regulation. That really worries me. There are certain areas (e.g. a restrictions on advertising to children, a tax on sugar sweetened beverages, etc) where I feel that regulation is absolutely warranted. So while individual Big Food-funded projects may be fantastic, I worry that it will allow the industry to avoid regulation that could have more far-reaching benefits. Sort of a win the battle, lose the war situation.

If all public health advocates were to stop partnering with Big Food, this would create a pretty large vacuum in terms of funding (unfortunately, those corporate social responsibility campaigns fund a lot of worthwhile projects... which, as I've [written previously](#), is the whole point). This has always been a big concern for me, and I still don't know how that vacuum could be filled (this is far from inconsequential – if we had another way to fill that vacuum, there would be far less need to partner with Big Food in the first place). This is not an abstract concern – I have not personally received funding from the [food industry](#), although I have worked with several individuals and organizations that have, and have therefore indirectly benefited from these partnerships myself. However, if the goal is to improve public health, then I'm starting to think that the

ends may not justify the means.

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