

Contracts give Coca-Cola power to 'quash' health research, study suggests

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A study of over 87,000 documents obtained through Freedom of Information requests has revealed a contract mechanism that could allow Coca-Cola to "quash" findings from some of the health research it funds

at public universities in the US and Canada.

The study, published today in the *Journal of Public Health Policy*, identified several clauses in [legal documents](#) that give the company early sight of any findings, combined with the right to "terminate without reason" and walk away with the data and intellectual property.

Taken together, these clauses could suppress "critical health information", and indeed may have done so already, according to the study's authors. Much of the research Coca-Cola supports is in the fields of nutrition, physical inactivity and [energy balance](#).

The authors argue that the clauses contravene Coca-Cola's commitments to transparent and "unrestricted" support for science, which came after criticism of the opaque way some major food corporations fund health research.

Researchers from the University of Cambridge, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, University of Bocconi, and US Right to Know, call on corporate funders to publish lists of terminated studies. They say scientists should publish agreements with industry to reassure the public that findings are free from influence.

"It is certainly true that the contracts we have found allow for unfavourable developments or findings to be quashed prior to publication," said lead author Dr. Sarah Steele, a policy researcher from Cambridge's Department of Politics and International Studies.

"Coca-Cola have declared themselves at the forefront of transparency when it comes to food and beverage giants funding health research. In fact, our study suggests that important research might never see the light of day and we would never know about it.

"We are already hearing accusations from experts in nutrition that the food industry is copying tactics from big tobacco's playbook. Corporate social responsibility has to be more than just shiny websites stating progressive policies that get ignored."

Consumption of high calorie, low nutrient food and drink is believed to be a major factor in the childhood obesity epidemic. Last year, the UK government introduced a "sugar tax" on many soft drinks, including Coca-Cola's flagship product.

US Right to Know, a non-profit consumer and public [health research](#) group, submitted 129 FOI requests between 2015 and 2018 relating to academics at North American institutions who received Coca-Cola funding.

The research team combed through the vast tranche of resulting documents and discovered five research agreements made with four universities: Louisiana State University, University of South Carolina, University of Toronto and the University of Washington.

The funded work includes "energy flux and balance" studies and research on beverage intake during exercise. Coca-Cola's own transparency website declares that scientists retain full control over their research and the company has no right to prevent publication of results.

However, while contracts show Coca-Cola does not control day-to-day conduct, the company retains various rights throughout the process. These include the right to receive updates and comment on findings prior to research publication, and the power to terminate studies early without reason.

The documents yielded by the FOI requests contained no firm examples of Coca-Cola suppressing unfavourable research, although the study

authors say "what is important is that the provision exists". All documents relating to the contracts are now accessible on the US Right to Know website.

Emails show one scientist expressing uncertainty over his study termination ("...they have not communicated with us in several months") and concern over [intellectual property](#).

Another scientist is seen arguing that his contract is "very restrictive for an 'unrestricted grant'".

"These contracts suggest that Coke wanted the power to bury research it funded that might detract from its image or profits," said Gary Ruskin, co-director of US Right to Know.

"With the power to trumpet positive findings and bury negative ones, Coke-funded science seems more like an exercise in public relations."

The researchers acknowledge that the food and beverage industry may be updating research contracts in line with new public commitments, but without seeing those contracts it is hard to know.

They say their Coca-Cola case study suggests a continued lack of transparency that should be remedied with "hard" information on funding, rather than relying on self-reported conflicts of interest.

"Journals should require authors of funded research to upload the research agreements for studies as appendices to any peer-reviewed publication," said Steele.

"The lack of robust information on input by industry and on studies terminated before results are published, makes it impossible to know how much of the research entering the public domain reflects industry

positions."

More information: *Journal of Public Health Policy*, [DOI: 10.1057/s41271-019-00170-9](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41271-019-00170-9), link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41271-019-00170-9

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