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How Coca-Cola Controls and Manipulates Research

Analysis by Dr. Joseph Mercola | November 16, 2023

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- FOIA documents obtained by U.S. Right to Know show Coca-Cola's research agreements with certain universities give it the right to review and comment on studies before publication, and intellectual property rights connected to the research
- The research contracts also give Coca-Cola control over study data, disclosure of results and acknowledgment of Coca-Cola funding, meaning the company could prevent the researchers from disclosing that their funding came from Coke, as well as the power to terminate studies early, without having to give a reason
- Earlier this year, another batch of emails obtained via FOIA requests revealed Coca-Cola lobbied the CDC to advance corporate objectives over health
- A (now former) CDC official provided aid and guidance to Coca-Cola in efforts to influence World Health Organization officials into relaxing its sugar limits
- A recent Coke-funded study concluded that children with the highest odds of obesity got the least amount of physical activity on both weekdays and weekends. Children with the lowest odds of obesity were the most active throughout the whole week

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I've written about the collusion between industry and the U.S. federal regulatory agencies on many occasions throughout the years, and how industry-funded research simply tends to promote and support the industry agenda rather than shed truthful light on the benefits or risks of any given product.

In recent years, the hidden influence of The Coca-Cola Company over health and sugar science has been highlighted several times and, according to recent findings, it appears the company has not changed its secretive and deceptive ways, despite public assurances of transparency.

Documents obtained via Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests reveal Coca-Cola's research agreements with certain universities give the company questionable rights over the research process, while other FOIA documents show Coca-Cola has an unreasonable amount of influence over the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Truly, having a public health organization that protects and supports industry rather than looking out for public health is worse than having no public health protection agency at all, and making health decisions on Coca-Cola funded research is bound to lead public health in the wrong direction — which is exactly what's been happening.

Coke's Research Agreements Allow It to Bury Unfavorable Findings

Big Soda's core message has been that the obesity epidemic is driven by a lack of activity, as opposed to indulging in sugar-based foods and beverages, despite overwhelming scientific evidence you will never be able to out-exercise your diet.

Recent FOIA documents obtained by the nonprofit consumer and public health watchdog organization U.S. Right to Know (USRTK) offer an explanation as to how the company can influence research to support and promulgate this false idea.[1,2,3,4] As noted in a commentary in The British Medical Journal:[5]

> *"The research team, from the University of Cambridge, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the University of Bocconi, and non-profit group US Right to Know, looked at five research agreements made with four universities: Louisiana State University, University of South Carolina, University of Toronto, and the University of Washington.*

> *They found that, although the contracts show that Coca-Cola does not have day-to-day control of the research, it has various rights throughout the process … This is despite Coca-Cola's website stating that 'in no event does The Coca-Cola Company have the right to prevent the publication of research results' …*
>
> *The authors are now calling on corporate funders to publish lists of terminated studies and on scientists to publish industry agreements to show that their findings are free from influence."*

Just how much influence do the agreements grant Coca-Cola? According to the featured paper,[6] published in the Journal of Public Health Policy, the research contract provisions give Coke:[7]

The right to review and comment on studies before publication
Intellectual property rights connected to the research[8,9]
Control over study data
Control over disclosure of results
Control over acknowledgment of Coca-Cola funding, meaning the company could prevent the researchers from disclosing that their funding came from Coke
Power to terminate studies early for any reason, including no reason

Coke-Funded Science Cannot Be Trusted

In a USRTK press release, Gary Ruskin, co-director of USRTK and co-author of the paper, commented:[10]

> *"These contracts suggest that Coke wanted the power to bury research it funded that might detract from its image or profits. With the power to trumpet*

> *positive findings and bury negative ones, Coke-funded 'science' seems somewhat less than science and more like an exercise in public relations."*

Marion Nestle, Ph.D.,[11] professor of nutrition and public health at New York University and author of "Soda Politics," in which she dissects the many ways in which funding from the food and beverage industry influences scientific results, calls the USRTK findings "jaw-dropping." She told Inverse:[12]

> *"It demonstrates what we have all long suspected. Companies that sponsor research make sure that they get what they pay for. The study documents the involvement of Coca-Cola in many aspects of developing research projects.*
>
> *It is no surprise that its funded research typically comes out with results that are useful for Coca-Cola marketing purposes. Industry funded research is marketing research, not scientific research."*

High Time for All Branches of Science to Mandate Preregistration of Studies

Since September 27, 2007, Section 801 of the Food and Drug Administration Amendments Act requires any clinical trial being undertaken to be registered, and summary results must be submitted to ClinicalTrials.gov[13] regardless of the outcome of the study. The reason for this is to help prevent publication bias where only positive findings see the light of day.

Unfortunately, this law only applies to certain clinical trials of drugs, biological products and medical devices,[14] and while researchers in many other fields have taken to preregistering their studies,[15,16] which means they must also publish their results, it's not a blanket requirement across the board.

As of yet, preregistration of trials is not a requirement for nutritional research, although there's a movement toward it. As noted in the 2015 editorial "Goals in Nutrition Science 2015-2020," published in Frontiers of Nutrition:[17]

> *"[T]here is a general movement in science for 'Transparency and Openness Promotion,' formalized in 'The TOP Guidelines.'[18] The guidelines recognize eight standards: citation, data transparency, analytic methods (code) transparency, research materials transparency, design and analysis transparency, preregistration of studies, preregistration of analysis plans, and replication.*
>
> *These standards aim to improve the communication of science, allowing improved understanding and replicability of results. Because the TOP Guidelines are being adopted across fields of science, the field of nutrition will not have to act in isolation to improve its scientific practices. Instead, we can build on and work with the minds and resources coming from a spectrum of scientific inquiry."*

Another paper,[19] "Best Practices in Nutrition Science to Earn and Keep the Public's Trust," published in January 2019, also highlights the TOP (transparency and openness promotion) guidelines that call for preregistration of studies.

On a quick side note, the first analysis[20] of preregistered studies reveals there's been a sharp increase in null findings, suggesting the practice is working as intended.

As reported by Nature, "Studies that preregister their protocols publish more negative findings that don't support their hypothesis, than those that don't."[21] This is important, because when mainly positive studies are published, it can easily create the false appearance that the evidence for a particular treatment is far stronger than it actually is.

CDC Colludes With Coca-Cola to Deceive You

Earlier this year, another batch of emails obtained via FOIA requests (after USRTK sued the CDC to get a response) revealed Coca-Cola was actively lobbying the CDC "to advance corporate objectives rather than health, including to influence the World Health Organization," USRTK said in a post on its website,[22] adding that the documentation demonstrates "a need for clearer policies on avoiding partnerships with manufacturers of harmful products."

These documents, featuring correspondence between Coca-Cola executives and the CDC, can be found in the USCF Food Industry Documents online archive.[23,24] A paper[25,26,27,28] detailing the connections between Coke and the CDC based on the email cache was published in The Milbank Quarterly in January 2019. In a press release announcing the publication of the paper, USRTK said:[29]

> *"Coca-Cola's contact with the CDC shows the company's interest in gaining access to CDC employees, to lobby policymakers, and to frame the obesity debate by shifting attention and blame away from sugar-sweetened beverages …*
>
> *'It is not the proper role of the CDC to abet companies that manufacture harmful products,' said Gary Ruskin, co-director of U.S. Right to Know. 'Congress should investigate whether Coca-Cola and other companies that harm public health are unethically influencing the CDC, and subverting its efforts to protect the health of all Americans.'*
>
> *'Once again we see the grave risks that arise when public health organisations* [sic] *partner with manufacturers of products that pose a threat to health,' said Martin McKee, professor of European public health at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine.*
>
> *'Sadly, as this example, and more recent ones in the United Kingdom show, these risks are not always appreciated by those who should know better.'"*

CDC Official Helped Coke Influence World Health Organization

In March 2015, WHO published a new sugar guideline that specifically targeted sugary beverages, calling them out as a primary cause for childhood obesity around the world, especially in developing nations, where the soda industry is now aggressively expanding its reach.

WHOs recommendation to limit soda consumption was a huge blow to an already beleaguered soda industry, struggling to maintain a declining market share amid

mounting evidence identifying sweetened drinks as a primary contributor to the obesity and diabetes epidemics.

Email correspondence between Alex Malaspina, a former Coca-Cola scientific and regulatory affairs leader and the founder of the food industry-funded group International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI), and Barbara Bowman, Ph.D., then-director of the CDC's Division for Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention, revealed Bowman repeatedly tried to help Malaspina get an audience with WHO officials, with the aim to talk them into relaxing the sugar limits.[30,31]

As noted by the USRTK,[32] while Bowman's job was to prevent obesity and related health problems, she "appeared happy to help the beverage industry cultivate political sway with the World Health Organization."

Bowman left the agency at the end of June 2016, just two days after the initial reports about her cozy relationship with Coke were made public,[33] which suggests she understood full well how inappropriate her behavior was.

This case also highlights the reality of corporate loyalty. As reported by the Huffington Post,[34] early in her career, Bowman worked as a senior nutritionist for Coca-Cola. She also co-wrote one of the editions of a nutritional book published by ILSI.[35]

It's human nature to remain loyal to former employers and colleagues, which is why the revolving door between industry and the agencies that regulate them is so problematic. People don't shed their corporate mindset just because they get a government title and a new set of responsibilities.

Latest Coca-Cola Funded Study Again Blames Inactivity for Childhood Obesity

Coca-Cola and other soda makers have invested a lot of money in research and PR efforts aimed at protecting sales through misdirection. Coca-Cola in particular has

worked hard to make it seem as though they're concerned about public health while secretly undermining real efforts to improve it.

For example, a historical analysis[36] published in 2016 found the sugar industry funded research that identified dietary fat as the culprit in heart disease, not sugar, and didn't disclose that funding.

A 2017 study[37] revealed that while sponsoring 95 U.S. health organizations, Coke was lobbying against public health bills aimed at reducing soda consumption through taxing, sugar limits and other strategies.

Coca-Cola and many other junk food manufacturers are also notorious for funding — and thus influencing — food and nutrition conferences and education.[38]

Most recently, a Coke-funded study[39] published in the International Journal of Obesity January 31, 2019, evaluated "the single and joint associations of objectively measured moderate-to-vigorous physical activity and sedentary time on week and weekend days with obesity in children from 12 countries …"

They concluded the odds of obesity were highest among those who got the least amount of physical activity on both weekdays and weekends. Children with the lowest odds of obesity were the most active throughout the whole week. As noted by Nestle in her Food Politics blog:[40]

> *"This is another paper from the ISCOLE study funded by Coca-Cola, that seems to be aimed at casting doubt on the idea that sugary beverages might promote weight gain. Instead, these results suggest that physical activity is a more important factor.*
>
> *Of course physical activity is important for health, but doesn't expend nearly as many calories as is usually needed to compensate for soft drink intake. I learned about this study from a Weighty Matters blog post[41] by Dr. Yoni Freedhoff, who runs a weight management center in Ottawa.*

In his view, the ISCOLE study ignores evidence[42] that childhood obesity is a determinant of physical activity, 'not the other way around.' He also questions the 'no influence' statement in the funding disclosure, on the basis of emails[43] between ISCOLE investigators and Coca-Cola that not surprisingly suggests that these relationships have the very real potential to influence the framing of results even if funders [are] not involved in study design.

As I discuss in 'Unsavory Truth,' the influence of food-industry funders appears to occur at an unconscious level; investigators do not recognize the influence and typically deny it."

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