



WN *Big Food Watch*

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Conferences

Unhappy Meals for US dietitians



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Big Food Watch convenor Fabio Gomes writes:

The profession of nutrition is in danger of being discredited. As can be seen by accessing the contributions accessible above, transnational manufacturers of ultra-processed products do not only sponsor sporting events. They also 'support' nutrition conferences, in ways that involve control of substantial parts of their programmes. This is wrong, and we in the profession of nutrition are implicated, for the arrangements made by conference scientific committees and professional organisers are done on our behalf.

We have now decided that it is time to put things right. *Big Food Watch* will continue to publish information about the relationships between conflicted industry, and nutrition societies, nutrition professionals and nutrition conferences. What we are now also agreed to do, is to prepare a guide for conference organisers. This will show that it is perfectly possible to mount conferences that are successful scientifically, financially and in all other ways, without the involvement of conflicted industry and the risks to scientific quality, credibility and reputation this involves. Details will be published soon in *WN*.

Plastic lunches



Lunchtime at the conference of the Californian branch of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, a must-attend event for dietitians in the US. The meal was happy for some but unhappy for others

One recent Friday afternoon, in a Marriott Hotel ballroom in Pomona, California, I watched two women evaluate their McDonald's lunches. One peered into a plastic bowl containing a salad of lettuce, bacon, chicken, cheese, and ranch dressing. The other arranged two chocolate chip cookies and a yogurt parfait on a napkin. 'Eww,' she said, gingerly stirring the layers of yoghurt and pink strawberry goop. The woman with the salad nodded in agreement, poking at a wan chicken strip with her plastic fork.

When I asked how they were liking their lunches, both women grimaced and assured me that they 'never' go to McDonald's. So why were they eating it today? Well, they didn't really have a choice. The women were registered dietitians halfway through day 2 of the annual conference of the California Dietetic Association. They were hoping to rack up some of the continuing education credits they needed to maintain their certification. McDonald's, the conference's featured sponsor, was the sole provider of lunch. 'I guess it's good to know that they have healthier options now,' said the woman with the salad.

As I wandered the exhibition hall, I saw that McDonald's wasn't the only food company giving away freebies. Cheerful reps at the Hershey's booth passed out miniature cartons of chocolate and strawberry milk. Butter Buds offered packets of fake butter crystals. The California Beef Council guy gave me a pamphlet on how to lose weight by eating steak. Amy's Naturals had microwave brownies. The night before, Sizzler, California Pizza Kitchen, Boston Market, and other chain restaurants had hosted a free evening buffet for conference-goers: 'Local restaurant samplings for your pleasure.'

And that wasn't all. The sessions – the real meat and potatoes of the conference – had food industry sponsors as well. Some provided funds. Some provided speakers. Some provided the whole package.

The Wheat Council hosted a presentation about how gluten intolerance was just a fad, not a real medical problem. The International Food Information Council, whose supporters include Coca-Cola, Hershey, Yum Brands, Kraft, and McDonald's, presented a discussion in which the panellists assured audience members that genetically modified foods were safe and environmentally sustainable. In 'Bringing affordable healthier food to communities', Walmart people sang the praises of (what else?) Walmart.

What is 'out there'

After lunch, I attended 'Sweeteners in schools: keeping science first in a controversial discussion'. Sponsored by the Corn Refiners Association, whose members produce and sell high-fructose corn syrup, it included a panel composed of three of the trade group's representatives. The panellists bemoaned some schools' decision to remove chocolate milk from their cafeteria menus.

Later, one panellist said that she'd been dismayed to learn that some schools had banned sugary treats from classroom Valentine's Day parties, which 'could be a teachable moment for kids about moderation.' The moderator nodded in agreement, and added 'The bottom line is that all sugars contain the same calories, so you can't say that there is one ingredient causing the obesity crisis.' The claim was presented as fact, despite mounting scientific evidence that high-fructose corn syrup prompts more weight gain than other sugars.

Later, I asked conference spokeswoman Pat Smith whether she thought it was fair to present such a one-sided discussion. She claimed that the sponsors did not influence any of the content in the programme. 'We like to think that our dietitians have a thought process, and that we are presenting them with what is out there,' she said. 'They need to make their own decisions on what they have listened to and apply that to their client base.'

'But it's hard to make a decision if you're only hearing one side of the story,' I countered. She told me that she hadn't known beforehand that the Corn Refiners panel would be composed entirely of its own representatives. And yet, when I asked her how the panel was chosen, she explained that it was approved by a committee. She also confirmed that the Corn Refiners had paid for the panel, but she declined to say how much. (She had previously declined me press credentials for the conference, explaining that the CDA would have its own journalists covering the event.)

Sippin' soda



At the McDonald's stand at the California Dietetic Association, conference participants were given easy-to-remember lessons about the healthy options now being offered at their outlets by McDonald's

With 75,000 members, the CDA's parent organization, the US national Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (AND), is the world's largest professional association for nutritionists and dietitians. It accredits undergraduate and graduate programmes in nutrition science, and awards credentials to dietitian degree candidates who pass its examinations. In Washington, its lobbying arm is active on issues including childhood obesity, Medicare, and the farm bill.

It also has strong ties to the food product manufacturing industry. In 2013 Michele Simon, a public health lawyer and food politics activist, launched an investigation into the academy's sponsorship policies. She found that its corporate support has increased dramatically over the past decade. In 2001, the Academy listed just 10 sponsors. By 2011, there were 38, including Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Nestlé, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, Mars, and many others. Corporate contributions are its largest source of income, generating nearly 40 percent of its total revenue. Simon also learned that in 2012, Nestlé paid \$US 47,200 for its 2,500-square-foot display in the exhibition hall at the annual AND conference, and PepsiCo paid \$US 38,000 for 1,600 square feet. The Academy's position papers, she noted, state that its sponsors do not influence its positions on controversial issues. And yet it often takes a pro-industry stance. When New York City was considering a ban on sales of oversized sodas, for example, the Academy opposed it.

AND is not the only powerful nutritionists' group with strong corporate ties. For instance, the sponsors of the School Nutrition Association's 2013 annual conference included PepsiCo, Domino's Pizza, and Sara Lee. SNA made headlines recently when it asked Congress to lift the rule that students must take fruits and vegetables on the lunch line, and to ease the rules around sodium and wholegrains.

A ban on snaps

Marion Nestle of New York University has written about nutritionists and corporate sponsorships in her book, *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*. 'I worry a lot about food industry co-optation of my profession,' she wrote to me in an email. 'Food companies are smart. They know that if they can make friends, and help inform dietitians and nutritionists, the people they are supporting or helping will be reluctant to suggest eating less of their products.'

Andy Bellatti, a dietitian and member of AND, recalls his shock the first time he attended the organisation's national conference, in 2008. 'I could get continuing education credits for literally sitting in a room and listening to Frito-Lay tell me that Sun Chips are a good way to meet my dietary fibre needs,' he says. 'I thought, no wonder Americans are overweight and diabetic. The gatekeepers for our information about food are getting their information from junk-food companies.'

Bellatti took photos of the displays in the exhibition hall and posted them on his blog. The post started a conversation among Academy members, many of whom were outraged when they learned about the sponsorships. They worried that if word got out that the dietitians' professional organisation had been bought out by food corporations, the profession would lose credibility. So Bellatti and several other members have founded Dietitians for Professional Integrity, consisting of Academy members who want to change the sponsorship policies. They lobbied the leadership, but nothing changed – except for the rules about photography at the annual conference. The following year, when Bellatti took out his camera in the exhibition hall, he was told that photographs were prohibited.

Sleeping with the enemy

Michelle Simon has found in a survey of AND members that four-fifths believe that 'sponsorship implies Academy endorsement of that company.' Just as many said that they thought members should have a say in selecting the sponsors, and most said that they would be willing to pay higher dues in order to avoid having so many corporations represented at the annual conference.

I asked AND spokesman Tom Ryan whether the Academy has any plans to review its rules for food industry sponsors. He referred me to the Academy's corporate sponsorship website, which contains no suggestion of forthcoming changes. When I pressed him on it, Ryan replied, 'I am not going to respond to that question.'

At the CDA conference I attended, most of the dietitians I talked to said that they did not realise the sessions were sponsored by companies. 'I hope they're telling us the real science,' said one graduate student attendee.

Toward the end of the day, I spoke to a 65-year-old retired dietitian from Orange County. She told me she'd been attending CDA's annual conferences for 30 years. Shaking her head, she said that she didn't approve of the trend of junk-food sponsors. 'I guess they need the money, but this is pathetic,' she said, rolling her eyes. She found the McDonald's lunch particularly deplorable. 'A dietitian you'd expect to be principled,' she said. 'But here I feel like we're sleeping with the enemy.'

Fabio Gomes adds:

If any reader is thinking 'oh, that's just about dietitians in California', please access the *WN* contributions listed at the beginning of this *BFW* piece. Also, as this issue of *WN* was being prepared to go on-line, news came in of 'Building a fairer, healthier Scotland' conference in Edinburgh, whose organisers had arranged 'gold' sponsorship by Nestlé which also involved infiltration of the programme itself. Members of the Scottish Public Health Network complained, saying: 'In view of your decision (some would suggest error) in accepting sponsorship from a transnational confectionery and breast milk substitute manufacturer, we will be recommending to colleagues that they should not attend or participate in your conference'. The arrangements were cancelled and Nestlé was booted out, of that meeting at least. Their representative said: 'we were very disappointed'. So, it can be done.

Status

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