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Sugar. WHO World Health Assembly

Big Sugar and the corridors of power

Access February 2014 Editorial on sugar here
Access February 2014 Update on sugar here
Access March 2014 Update on sugar here
Access NUGAG report out for consultation here

Geoffrey Cannon reports:



Over the years, sugar has been hammered in the popular media and in books, and more recently in specialist journals and by dedicated organisations. But Big Sugar is not yet defeated, as we will see

Introduction

In May, next month, the WHO World Health Assembly holds its week-long annual meeting. A hot topic in corridor discussions, receptions, and private meetings, and maybe formal sessions also, will be sugar. The WHO expert advisory NUGAG group's report, recommending a global top number for added sugars at 10 per cent of dietary energy (1), was *out for comment until 31 March*. The report could be ratified. But past experience indicates that It could be delayed, changed, or sidelined as a mere discussion document. NUGAG could be newly gagged. This all could happen secretly.

WHO is under pressure from Big Sugar and its associated and representative organisations to cancel any restrictions on sugar or even to discard NUGAG. In any case, UN recommendations are never accepted by or in the US. This has all happened before, as summarised here. The coalition of Big Sugar corporations and their front organisations, member states whose economies depend on sugar production, and policy-makers including scientists linked with industry, has twice sabotaged WHO recommendations on sugar, in 1990-1992 and 2003-2004. This could happen again.

The 2003-2004 defeat



Derek Yach, then WHO director responsible for global strategy on nutrition and disease prevention, at the 2004 World Health Assembly. In 2007 he joined PepsiCo as director of global health policy

Almost 200 million tonnes of sugars and syrups are produced from cane, beet or corn every year. These are the most profitable legal cash crops after tobacco. The profits of most manufacturers of ultra-processed products depend on sugar, for preservation, bulking, and sensory attraction. These facts help to explain the politics of sugar.

Derek Yach is pictured above, ten years ago at the 2004 World Health Assembly (WHA). He then was the World Health Organization assistant director-general responsible for global policy on nutrition and health. In 2001 he commissioned the WHO-FAO '916' report on the topic, published in 2003, whose recommendations included less than 10 per cent of dietary energy from sugar (2). In 2004 he was preparing the WHO global strategy on nutrition and health (3), and was under pressure. We chatted at the WHA and I sympathised. He beckoned me into a corridor and made full and witty disclosure by uncovering a stash of refreshments for the delegates. Yes, Coca-Cola was everywhere at the WHA, together with many other food and drink transnationals and people from their front organisations.

Now it is ten years later. Next month, representatives of WHO member states will discuss sugar again at the WHA, informally even if not formally. They will respond to the recommendation of the *WHO 'NUGAG' expert advisory group* that the top number for added sugars should be 10 per cent of total dietary energy (1). Recommendations of expert groups convened by WHO are usually accepted at WHO meetings. Usually – but not always. In 1992 I was a member of the UK delegation at the FAO-WHO International Conference on Nutrition. In 2001 I was a member of the Brazilian delegation at the WHO Executive Board meeting. I have been involved in many other regional and global UN meetings. So I know that reliably-based recommendations made to and by WHO at its meetings can be and have been overturned.

Box 1

The US ideology

The position of the US on nutrition and public health is sometimes misunderstood. It has been thought that the implacable attack by the US in 2003-2004 against WHO on the issue of recommendations to restrict sugar consumption (4, and see text below) was driven by commercial motives – protection of the US sugar industry, donations from Big Sugar, and so on. Not so. Profits were as always a factor, but the driving force was and is ideological.

The USA, as now the one world superpower, in principle rejects any international initiatives, such as from the UN and its agencies, unless these coincide with its own interests. Also, the USA is committed to opening global 'markets' to penetration by transnational corporations, and so also on principle is against any restriction of the freedom of corporations to do whatever they want within prevailing laws. It has been thought that this ideology, rampant in the 2000-2008 Bush administrations, is now relaxed in favour of public health in the 2008-2016 Obama administrations. This hope is in vain. In the US it remains business as usual. The rhetoric has changed but not the realities. The most powerful adversary of global public health and public goods remains the US government, which itself is driven by what President Eisenhower characterised as 'the military-industrial complex'.

Proposed WHO resolutions on infant and young child nutrition are one example. Another concerns sugar. Since the mid 20th century, much science on sugar, health and disease has been neglected by investigators, and manipulated and distorted by Big Sugar, meaning forces organised by corporations whose profits depend on sugared products (4,5). Any research whose findings exonerate added sugars as a cause of obesity, diabetes, heart disease and so on, is quite likely to have been funded by Big Sugar, or carried out by investigators obliged to be clients of industry funding (6).

Big Sugar power play #2

In 2004 at the WHA the attack against WHO was led by the US delegation. This was the time of the younger George Bush, when the US administration was increasingly contemptuous of the UN. At the WHA the US delegation was led by William Steiger, a godson of the older George Bush, who had been drafted in to the US Department of Health and Human Services with the brief in effect to torpedo the global strategy and discredit the 916 report (4,5). This he did. The US government used its bludgeon – WHO was reminded that 22 per cent of its inadequate income is from the US, and was told that as a technical agency it has no right to set standards. William Steiger is pictured below being briefed, and obviously wanting to ask why he is being photographed. If he had asked, the answer would have been 'posterity'.

The resulting WHO global strategy (3) was vague, had no numbers, made no reference to the 2003 report whose findings, backed by background papers, were the scientific basis for the strategy, and left it to national governments to make their own recommendations. WHO was defeated. Derek Yach left WHO, and after two other brief jobs, as a memorable example of 'if you can't beat them, join them', was hired by Pepsi-Co as Senior Vice-President, Global Health Policy.



William Steiger, godson of elder George Bush, head of US delegation at the 2004 WHO WHA, younger George Bush hit-man tasked with defeating WHO proposals to restrict sugar, which he did

The 1990-1992 defeat

The first WHO report on nutrition and the prevention of chronic diseases, or '797', was published in 1990 (7). This was also the first UN report to give a number for added sugars, which it set at less than 10 per cent, accurately while provocatively expressed as '0-10'. Pandemonium! Governments among the over 100 sugar-producing countries round the world were alerted by sugar trade organisations and advised that their national economies were under attack. WHO was told – then, and later, and also now – that there is no scientific basis for quantified guidelines. Like the 916 report (2), 797 remained on the WHO booklist, but was downplayed. Well-resourced governments like those of the US and UK, able to commission reports of their own, paid little or no attention to it. Less-resourced governments, especially of countries that produce sugar, like Brazil, India, and China, were advised to ignore 797.

Big Sugar power play #1

Then came the first International Conference on Nutrition in 1992, convened by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization. As a member of the UK delegation I participated in meetings in Copenhagen, Geneva, and the ICN itself in Rome. It became apparent that a mission of interested parties outside and inside the UN system was to eliminate the word 'sugar' in the final *World Declaration and Plan of Action* (8). A leader in the attack was the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI), founded by a senior vice-president of Coca-Cola, then as now funded and controlled by transnational food manufacturing and associated corporations, notably Big Sugar (9). After a dramatic final emergency session, which I attended, during which an awesomely orchestrated series of delegates from sugar-producing countries stood up and denounced any concerns about sugar, the mission was accomplished. When the chips are down, nutrition is not a technical issue. It is all about money and power.

So after 1990-1992 and 2002-2003, will things be any different in 2014? The relevant *expert NUGAG report,* remember, recommends a top number of 10 per cent of dietary energy (1), with a note that further reduction to less than 5 per cent would be additionally beneficial. The X factor this time is WHO director-general Margaret Chan herself, now in her final term, a master diplomat, *well aware of the dark deeds of Big Sugar,* comparable with those of Big Tobacco. My guess is that the 5 per cent number will be sidelined to be ignored, but that the 10 per cent figure (1), given massive new evidence on sugars, syrups and obesity, will remain. But see Box 2. To be continued…

Box 2

10 per cent and the sugar wars

Dietary guidelines reports began to use quantified recommendations over half a century ago. Thus since the 1960s, reports have stated that consumption of saturated fats should amount to less than 10 per cent of dietary energy. International reports usually also state that in any country with an average consumption less than 10 per cent, the amount should not rise. Since the 1970s numbers have also been used for other nutrients and foods seen as significant, including total fat, polyunsaturated fat, carbohydrates, proteins, salt (or sodium), and (later) dietary fibre, and vegetables and fruits. When a limit is given for added sugars and syrups this is usually, as with the NUGAG report, stated as 10 per cent (1).

Quantification for any dietary component is a matter of judgement, derived from evidence on incidence of related diseases. In the case of sugar, rates of dental caries rise throughout life at levels far below 10 per cent, which is why the NUGAG report, although recommending a top number of 10 per cent, is suggesting less than 5 per cent. Numbers are essential for public health policy and planning. National nutrition and health policy planners need to know how their country stands at any time and over time. The nutrition labels of processed products required by regulators specify what proportion of a quantified recommendation for any food component is contained in a portion of a product. And so on.

There are crucial differences between ways in which a figure is expressed, and there is a surprising basic mistake in the draft NUGAG report (1). Its draft recommendation states that intake 'should not exceed' 10 per cent, whereas the 'remarks' in the draft specify 'less than', which is correct and consistent with the science on dental caries and weight gain. The 'not exceed' formulation is industry-friendly, because it can be used to suggest that any amount up to 9.9 per cent is healthy, or even that 10 per cent is some sort of target. This perverse interpretation has in effect been accepted by regulators and is used by manufacturers on food labels in the cases of total energy and saturated fat.

Food manufacturers hate quantification. Corporations whose profits depend on added sugars and syrups, with their trade and front organisations, have so far successfully resisted numbers for sugar. This is why the WHO '797' and '916' reports were sidelined. In any case the US does not accept recommendations made by UN agencies. This is also why nutrition labels in the US and other countries state that a daily value for sugar 'has not been established'. If a top limit of 10 per cent was accepted and enforced, the nutrition label of a small 350 millilitre can of Coca-Cola, whose 149 calories are all sugar or syrup, would have to state that this one can alone contained 75 per cent of the top limit. If the top limit was set at 5 per cent, as suggested in the NUGAG report, the Coke nutrition label would have to state that one small can was over the limit. But this won't happen. Transnational corporations like Coca-Cola are too powerful. This is what the sugar wars are all about.

References and note

1 World Health Organization. *Guidelines: Sugar intake for adults and children.* (The 'NUGAG' report). Draft for consultation, March 2014. Geneva. WHO. There is a contradiction in the draft. The recommendation is 'not exceed 10 per cent' but the 'remarks' has 'less than 10 per cent'. These are different. 'Not exceed' suggests that anything up to 9.9 per cent is healthy and even that 10 per cent is a target to reach. Let us hope that this mistake will be corrected.

2 World Health Organization. *Diet, Nutrition and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases*. WHO technical report series 916. Geneva: WHO, 2003.

3 World Health Organization. *Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health*. Geneva: WHO, 2004.

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6 Bes-Rastrollo M, Schulze M, Ruiz-Canela M, Martinez-Gonzalez M. Financial conflicts of interest and reporting bias regarding the association between sugar-sweetened beverages and weight gain. A systematic review of systematic reviews. *PLoS Medicine* 31 December 2013, 10(12): e1001578. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1001578. *Access pdf here*

7 World Health Organization. *Diet, Nutrition and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases*. WHO technical report series 797. Geneva: WHO, 1990.

8 UN Food and Agriculture Organization. International Conference on Nutrition. *World Declaration and Plan of Action*. Rome: FAO, 1992.

9 Simon M. *And Now a Word from our Sponsors. Are America's Nutrition Professionals in the Pocket of Big Food ?* January 2013. *Pdf of the report available here.*

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