WN *Feedback*

World Nutrition **Volume 5, Number 3, March 2014**
Journal of the World Public Health Nutrition Association
Published monthly at www.wphna.org/worldnutrition/

Trans-fats. Partial hydrogenation
The world is watching the US FDA

Access February 2014 Geoffrey Cannon Inspiration on Fred Kummerow here
Access February 2014 Fred Kummerow Feedback letter here



Fred Kummerow, the man in blue (left), is sueing the US FDA, specifically the women with the red background (right), Margaret Hamburg and her boss in the Obama cabinet Kathleen Sebelius

From Fred A Kummerow:

The US Food and Drug Administration has given the food manufacturing industry another 60 days to respond to their intention to withdraw the classification 'generally recognised as safe' from *trans*-fats. The comment period that was scheduled to end 7 January 2014 has been extended to 8 March at 11:59 pm, US East Coast time.
If and when this action is at last taken, *trans*-fats will in due course effectively be eliminated from the US food supply.

As stated in *my previous WN letter*, last August I filed a lawsuit against the US Food and Drug Administration (1,2), specifically addressing FDA commissioner Margaret Hamburg and her boss the Department of Health and Human Services secretary Kathleen Sebelius (right hand picture, above). This states that the FDA's failure to ban the use of partially hydrogenated oils containing artificial *trans* fat in food for human consumption, is unlawful. This is not a matter for the food product manufacturing industry. The prime duty of the FDA is to protect public health. That is what it is there for. *Trans* fats are a prime cause of cardiac deaths. The less industrially generated *trans* fats there are in food supplies the better, true – but there is no safe upper limit. *Trans*-fats, and therefore the partial hydrogenation process that

generates *trans*-fats, must be totally eliminated from food supplies in the US, and worldwide, by law.

Trans fats are lethal

Here is why trans-fats are lethal. The hydrogenation of soybean oil creates 14 synthetic fatty acids not present in animal fat or vegetable oil. These synthetic fatty acids inhibit an enzyme (U2) that is necessary to syntheses linoleic acid to arachidonic acid (3). Arachidonic acid is needed to synthesise prostacyclin in arterial walls to keep blood flowing. Partially hydrogenated oils entered food supplies in 1910, increased rapidly up to 1968, and are still in food supplies and thus in diets, in the US and worldwide (4).

Data from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that rates of cardiac death started increasing in 1910 and continued to rise until 1968, at which time they started to decline, which they have every year since (5). Even though the CDC has observed a remarkable decrease in the age-adjusted rate of heart disease-related deaths since 1968, margarine and very many other food products containing partially hydrogenated oils are still inhibiting the synthesis of arachidonic acid to prostacyclin, right now. Data from the CDC reckon that almost 600,000 Americans died of heart disease in 2011, 325,000 of which from sudden cardiac death (6).

I was a member of a committee of the American Heart Association from 1965 to 1968. At that time I collected enough information from WH Meyer, who was the manager of professional and regulatory relations for margarine manufacturers Procter and Gamble (7), to realise that *trans* fats were inhibiting the process of prostacyclin synthesis. I suggested that the *trans* fats should be eliminated from margarine. However, the margarine industry only agreed to lower *trans* fat from an average of 44 to 27 per cent and to increase the amount of linoleic acid from 8 to 25 per cent (8). I believe that it was not by chance that the age-adjusted rate of heart disease-related deaths began to decrease in 1968.

There is no safe limit

The biochemistry of *trans* fats and their impact on the cardiovascular system is conclusive. At zero per cent of *trans* fat content in the body, the prostacyclin release from vascular endothelial cells is 38.7 ng/mg of cell protein. Data released in the Federal Register states that in 2012, the average American could be consuming 2.1 grams of *trans* fat per day, with the 90th top percentile consuming 4.2 grams per day. At the rate of 2.1 grams of *trans* fat per day, the cells in the arteries will release 25 ng/mg cell protein, a significant drop from zero per cent *trans* fat. At 4.2 grams per day the cells release only 15.5 ng/mg cell protein (1). As more grams per day of *trans* fat are consumed, prostacyclin release from vascular endothelial cells decreases. This proves a causal relationship between the two processes. The key point here is that there is no safe limit. The only safe amount of industrially generated *trans* fat, is zero.

In 1910, no one knew what effect margarine would have on the life, health and death of Americans. We now know, a century later, that 'heart disease' is not a disease. It is a somatic response to a simple error involving the effect of *trans* fat in partially hydrogenated oil on prostacyclin synthesis.

Based on animal experiments, there is potential good news for people concerned about their current cardiovascular health. Over half a century ago I found that when rats were fed *trans* fat, it was deposited in their tissue (9). Then when it was taken out of their diet, the *trans* fat was completely metabolised within one month, and there was no longer *trans* fat in their tissue. If this applies to humans, once *trans* fat is completely removed from the US food supply the *trans* fat will be metabolised – removed – from human tissues. Just as soon as the FDA does its duty to ban *trans* fats, there will be less sudden cardiac death.

The cost of action – and inaction

Richard Bruns, an economist with the FDA, has searched the FoodEssential database for products available in the US that contain partially hydrogenated oils, and has found 26,000 such products, or about 12 per cent of all packaged foods. He has rounded the number up to 30,000 to account for products that might be missing from the database.

Using the FDA reformulation cost model to calculate the average cost of a change in critical and noncritical minor ingredients, the average reformulation cost for a critical ingredient is $US 128,000 and noncritical $US 54,000, if the change is made in one year. Multiplying those numbers by the number of products, the estimate one-time reformulation costs are $US 2.7 billion (10).On page 67173 of the Federal Register it is estimated that the initial costs of removing PHOs from the US food supply to be about $US 8 billion (1).

This is why industry is pressing the FDA to relax their intention to declare partially hydrogenated oils to be unsafe. They want to avoid these costs. But I suggest the amounts stated are overestimates. Bunge has developed a patented trans-free bakery shortening without the hydrogenation process (11). Worldwide Unilever quit using hydrogenated oils in their margarines in 2010 (12). Archer Daniels Midland has had trans-free margarine and shortenings available since 1968, according to their research director. So why is $US 8 billion needed to remove partially hydrogenated oils, when companies have already found out how to remove it? I maintain that the cost to reformulate will be small. There are already *trans*-free fats available that in oils that in other respects have the same characteristics as partially hydrogenated oils.

The decision the FDA must make

Now Margaret Hamburg has a decision to make. She could decide to let the presence of *trans* fats in the US food supply continue to be controlled by the manufacturers for

whom *trans* fats are commercially convenient. This will result in a continuation of high rates of cardiac death. Or, she could decide that public health is more important that industry profits, confirm that partially hydrogenated oils are unsafe, and thus effectively make their use in any amounts illegal. This will result in a further decrease in cardiac deaths. Her deadline is 9 March. Because of the influence of US public health policies and actions her decision, one way or the other, will affect food supplies throughout the world. The whole world is watching.

Fred A. Kummerow
Department of Biosciences, University of Illinois, US
Email: fkummero@illinois.edu

References

1 US Food and Drug Administration. Tentative determination regarding partially hydrogenated oils; request for comments and for scientific data and information. Federal Register. 78(217), 8 November 2013, 67169-67175.

2 Kummerow F. Fred Kummerow, plaintiff, v US Food and Drug Administration, Margaret Hamburg, Michael J Landa, Kathleen Sebelius. United States District Court, Central District of Illinois. Filed 9 August 2013. *Access pdf here*

3 Kummerow FA. The negative effects of hydrogenated trans fats and what to do about them. *Atherosclerosis* 2009, **205**, 458-465.

4 Kummerow FA, Mahfouz M, Zhou Q, Masterjohn C. Effects of *trans* fat on prostacyclin production. *Scandinavian Cardiovascular Journal,* 2013, **47**, 377-382.

5 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Leading causes of death 1900-1998. www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/dvs/lead1900_98.pdf.

6 Jain M. Explaining why so many cases of cardiac arrest strike in the morning. Presented at the national meeting of the American Chemical Society. 6-11 September, 2013.

7 Letter to FA Kummerow from WH Meyer. Manager, professional and regulatory relations, Proctor and Gamble, 1968. Original in possession of the author.

8 Kummerow FA. Viewpoint on the report of the national cholesterol education program expert panel of detection, evaluation, and treatment of high blood cholesterol in adults. *Journal of American College of Nutrition.* 1993, **12**, 2-13.

9 Johnston PV, Johnson OC, Kummerow FA. Deposition in tissues and fecal excretion of *trans* fatty acids in the rat. *Journal of Nutrition.* May 1958, **65**, 13-23.

10 Memorandum from R. Bruns to M. Honegfort, 5 November 2013, FDA Docket ID 2013- N -1314, www. regulations.gov.

11 Cullinery K. Bunge: Consumer concerns on hydrogenation prompted R & D. 4 November 2013. www.bakeryandsnacks.com/Ingredients/Bunge-consumer-concerns-on-hydrogenation-prompted-R-D.

12 Horowitz B. *USA Today.* www.usatoday30.usatoday.com...2009-07-26-transfat-unilever.

*Kummerow FA Trans-fats. Partial hydrogenation. The world is watching the US FDA [Feedback]. World Nutrition March 2014, **5**, 3, 284-287*

Trans-fats. Partial hydrogenation
When and why the scales tipped

Access May 1994 AJPH Walter Willett and Albert Ascherio on trans fats here Access February 2014 Geoffrey Cannon Inspiration on Fred Kummerow here
Access February 2014 Fred Kummerow Feedback letter here

From Walter Willett:

Fred Kummerow (1) had the understanding and vision to know that *trans* fat could be a problem. When I read his papers back in the 1970s I realised that more data would be needed if a convincing case was to be made, and so we at the Harvard School of Public Health started to create a database on the *trans* fat content of foods so we could study the possible ill-effects. It took us 13 years to get enough follow-up results for our first paper from the Nurses' Health Study in *The Lancet* (2). For better or worse, epidemiology takes a long time!

The role of Unilever

Yes, Unilever did play an important role by taking this issue seriously. They were strongly influenced by Martijn Katan's work (3) (which they had funded), and then by finding out that it was indeed possible to make *trans* free margarines when the rest of the industry said it could not be done. Onno Korver, their global chief nutrition scientist from 1980 to 2000, later told me that it was our 1994 editorial in the *American Journal of Public Health* (4) in which we calculated the large number of deaths per year due to *trans* fat, that tipped the scales for their decision to eliminate them as from that year (5).

Fred Kummerow raised an important issue and was trampled by powerful interests. And he is amazingly still on the front lines in his hundredth year! Would that we will also be there!

Walter Willett
Harvard School of Public Health, Boston MA, US
Email: wwillett@hsph.harvard.edu

References

1 Cannon G. Fred Kummerow. The man who knew about *trans* fats. *Inspiration. World Nutrition* 2014, **5,** 2, 169-173. *Access pdf here*

2 Willett WC, Stampfer MJ., Manson JE., Colditz GA., Speizer FE., Rosner BA., Sampson LA., Hennekens CH. Intake of *trans* fatty acids and risk of coronary heart disease among women. *Lancet* 1993; **341**: 581-585.

3 Mensink RP, Katan MB. Effect of dietary trans fatty acids on high-density and low-density lipoprotein cholesterol levels in healthy subjects. *New England Journal of Medicine* 1990, **323**, 439-445.

4 Willett WC, Ascherio A. Trans-fatty acids. Are the effects only marginal? *Commentary American Journal of Public Health* 1994, **84**, 722-724. *Access pdf here*

5 Korver O, Katan M. The elimination of trans fats from spreads: How science helped to turn an industry around. *Nutrition Reviews* 2008, **64,** 6, 275-279.

*Willett W. Trans-fats. Partial hydrogenation. When and why the scales tipped. [Feedback]. World Nutrition March 2014, **5**, 3, 288-289*

Trans-fats. Partial hydrogenation
The FDA 'ban' – questions remain

Access November 2013 US FDA tentative determination on trans fats
Access January 2014 Gyorgy Scrinis commentary on the trans-fats fiasco here
Access February 2014 Geoffrey Cannon Inspiration on Fred Kummerow here
Access February 2014 Fred Kummerow Feedback letter here

From Gyorgy Scrinis

WN in January carried a commentary by me largely concerned with the *trans*-fats fiasco (1). Here I comment further on the announcement by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) of its proposal to remove the 'Generally Recognized as Safe' (GRAS) designation previously granted to partially hydrogenated oils – the main source of industrially produced *trans*-fats in the food supply (2). This has been accompanied by a detailed 'tentative determination' to that effect (3).

The FDA action was reported as heralding the 'banning' of *trans*-fats. The FDA decision should result in removal of the bulk of the *trans*-fats remaining in the US food supply. However, there are many questions not being asked about the limitations of this move, or about what is not being admitted. In any case, industrial *trans*-fats themselves are not being 'banned' in the US – not yet, at any rate. Nor are *trans*-fats levels in foods to be directly regulated. Nor are other minor sources of *trans*-fats being banned or regulated.

Further, few questions are being asked as to the safety and health implications of the processing techniques and ingredients that will replace *trans*-fats and partially hydrogenation, such as the use of full hydrogenated oils and other processing techniques that chemically reconstitute fats.

Regulatory initiatives

Despite the scientific consensus regarding the harmfulness of *trans*-fats dating back to the early and mid 1990s (4-6), governments around the world have either failed to act, or have taken many years to introduce measures to reduce the presence of *trans*-

fats in food supplies. The delay in action may have given manufacturers ample time to reformulate their products, but this has been at the expense of the public's health.

In 2004 Denmark introduced a *trans*-fat limit of 2 per cent of fats and oils. In 2006 New York City introduced a limit of 0.5 grams *trans*-fats per serving, which is still a significant amount. Canada and the US introduced *trans*-fat labelling regulations in 2005 and 2006 respectively. However the US labelling regulations permit products containing up to 0.5 grams per serving to be labelled as '0 grams *trans*-fats', which is clearly misleading – well, untrue. Despite such flawed regulations, *trans*-fat labelling has prompted manufacturers to reformulate those of their products which have contained high levels of *trans*-fats.

So, such regulatory initiatives have been successful in reducing levels of *trans*-fat consumption in a number of countries, up to a point. Other countries such as Australia and the UK have imposed no mandatory regulations, but manufacturers have nevertheless voluntarily reduced the *trans*-fat levels in many foods. Yet in the US and elsewhere, the continued presence of *trans*-fats in some foods – typically cheaper, highly processed, poorer quality products – means that people who eat a high proportion of these foods may still be consuming high levels of *trans*-fats. The situation in countries in Asia, Africa and other regions and countries where regulation is erratic or notional, is another story.

It is in this context that the FDA proposes to remove the 'generally recognised as safe' status of partially hydrogenated vegetable oils, and thereby classify these oils as potentially hazardous additives and as such not permitted to be used in food products. The regulation will probably be effective in removing the bulk of the remaining *trans*-fats in the US food supply.

The FDA may be only targeting partially hydrogenated oils because, by now, most large food manufacturers should have developed alternative processing techniques and additives, having been given over a decade's warning to do so. But this new regulation is also likely to be phased in over a long period, thereby in that time continuing to expose the US population to what the FDA has now admitted to be a health hazard.

However, having finally acknowledged that industrial *trans*-fats are hazardous, and that there is no recognised 'safe' level of consumption of *trans*-fats, the FDA is not yet placing any bans or limits on *trans*-fats levels in foods *per se*.

Other sources of trans-fats

Also, the FDA acknowledges that there are two other sources of industrial *trans*-fats that it does not intend to regulate or ban.

One is the initial process of extracting and refining vegetable oils using extremely high temperatures, such as during the deodorisation process. This may produce *trans*-fats of the order of 1 to 4 per cent. While these quantities may be relatively low compared with those produced by the partial hydrogenation process, there are enormous quantities of these unhydrogenated vegetable oils now flowing through the food supply and through our bodies.

Vegetable oil producers certainly would not want the public to know that there may be *trans*-fats in their oils, nor to have any restrictions placed on their processing methods or use. Similarly, nutrition and public health experts and organisations that promote vegetable oils high in polyunsaturated fats would find it difficult to present these unhydrogenated oils as 'healthy oils' if the continued presence of *trans*-fats was more widely known. It is therefore no surprise that we see little discussion or analysis of this source of *trans*-fats.

Other techniques

Another source of industrial *trans*-fats is the technique of fully hydrogenating vegetable oils, which is used to transform all of the unsaturated fats into saturated fats. Yet this process of chemically transforming fats is usually incomplete, resulting in levels of *trans*-fats in the end product of up to 2 per cent. Thus, the same technique that chemically transforms fats into *trans*-fats will continue to be permitted for use as long as the process is continued to the point where low-levels of *trans*-fats are formed. But are even fully hydrogenated oils safe? Have their health effects been studied separately from partially hydrogenated oils?

Few nutrition experts or government regulators seem to be questioning what partially hydrogenated vegetable oils will be substituted with, other than being concerned that *trans*-fats aren't replaced with saturated fats. But food companies are now using a range of old and new food processing techniques, additives, and vegetable oil varieties that achieve the same functionality as *trans*-fats, such as a long shelf life, processing stability, mouth-feel, and the crunchy texture that has made *trans*-fats so profitable. Blending fully hydrogenated and unhydrogenated vegetable oils is one strategy being used to produce a low *trans*-fat product.

Another technique increasingly now used to chemically reconstitute fats is interesterification. Since the 1990s many margarine producers have been subjecting vegetable oils to a combination of full hydrogenation, fractionation and interesterification techniques in order to produce a low *trans*-fat product. Few studies have examined the health effects of consuming interesterified fats, or what I call *i*-fats. Some have suggested possible harmful effects.

So the *trans*-fats fiasco may be repeated, by allowing and encouraging the use of novel and inadequately tested fat processing technology.

A step forward, but…

The FDA's proposed ban of partially hydrogenated oils from the US food supply is an important step forward. But the FDA, and regulatory bodies in other countries, could do more to regulate *trans*-fats and other potentially hazardous fats and oils. They could ban all oil processing techniques that produce industrial *trans*-fats. They could ban or set very low limits on the presence of industrial *trans*-fats in food products. And they could remove the 'generally recognised as safe' status from all processing techniques that chemically reconstitute fats, until such time as they have been proven safe and healthful.

In the meantime nutrition experts could stop referring to *trans*-fats as a 'bad fat' on a par with saturated fats, and cease using the language of good and bad nutrients. Instead they could characterise industrial *trans*-fats as hazardous food additives.

The *trans*-fats fiasco, for this is what it has been and still is, also points to the need to shift away from a reductive interpretation of the nutrient composition of foods, a key feature of what I identify as the ideology of nutritionism. We instead need to develop our understanding of the way various processing techniques are transforming and in some cases degrading the quality of foods. Nutrition experts, and indeed the public, need to develop their food quality literacy, not just their nutritional literacy.

Gyorgy Scrinis
University of Melbourne, Australia
Email: gyorgys@unimelb.edu.au
Website: www.gyorgyscrinis.com

References

1 Scrinis G. Nutritionism. Hydrogenation. Butter, margarine and the trans-fat fiasco. [Commentary]. *World Nutrition* January 2014, **5**, 1, 33-63. *Access pdf here.*

2 US Food and Drug Administration. FDA takes step to further reduce trans fat in processed foods. Press release, 7 November 2013. *Access pdf here*

3 US Food and Drug Administration. *Tentative Determination Regarding Partially Hydrogenated Oils. Federal Register* **78**. 217, 8 November 2013. *Access pdf here*

4 Willett WC, Stampfer MJ., Manson JE., Colditz GA., Speizer FE., Rosner BA., Sampson LA., Hennekens CH. Intake of *trans* fatty acids and risk of coronary heart disease among women. *Lancet* 1993; **341**: 581-585.

5 Mensink RP, Katan MB. Effect of dietary trans fatty acids on high-density and low-density lipoprotein cholesterol levels in healthy subjects. *New England Journal of Medicine* 1990, **323**, 439-445.

6 Willett WC, Ascherio A. Trans-fatty acids. Are the effects only marginal? *Commentary American Journal of Public Health* 1994, **84**, 722-724. *Access pdf here* .

*Scrinis G. Trans-fats. Partial hydrogenation, The US FDA 'ban' – questions remain [Feedback]. World Nutrition March 2014, **5**, 3, 289-292*

Big Food Watch. The Gates Foundation
Beware geeks bearing gifts



BIG FOOD WATCH

Access April 2011 PLoS Medicine David Stuckler et al on global philanthropy here
Access October December 2013 Fabio Gomes on Words for our sponsors here
Access January 2014 Claudio Schuftan on the Gates Foundation here
Access February 2014 Claudio Schuftan on Bill Gates here

Big Food Watch network member Claudio Schuftan writes:



Capitalists being philanthropic is not new. Andrew Carnegie and John D Rockefeller (above) gained vast wealth and disbursed much of it to causes they thought good. But philanthrocapitalism is new

Another comment I have received, following my two letters on the *Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation,* and on *Bill Gates himself*, in *WN* this January and February, is: What is 'philanthrocapitalism', and does it have a context? In the US above all, yes it does have a context. Also, as I explain here, 'philanthrocapitalism' is not just a smart new name for philanthropy undertaken by capitalists. There is more to it than that.

Take Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) and John D Rockefeller (1839-1937), satirised above. They made their money and gained their power by using the US capitalist system designed to favour big business, to build steel and oil businesses that became quasi-monopolies. Both believed in 'Social Darwinism', and interpreted its 'survival of the fittest' and 'the race is to the strong' perversions of Charles Darwin's theory to justify severe employment and business practices. When they established foundations to disburse much of their wealth, they were accused of using this apparent generosity as a way to rescue their reputations and to protect their power.

Money and power



Standard Oil, John D Rockefeller's quasi-monopolistic corporation, gained Rockefeller vast wealth and power. But the Rockefeller Foundation has generally fostered social justice and the public good

A deeper accusation was against a system that then as now, protected the most ruthless capitalists and enabled some individuals to accumulate vast amounts of money – in Rockefeller's case eventually amounting to 1.5 per cent of the then US gross domestic product – and to use their clout to shape national political policies in ways that suited them. The 1904 cartoon above, projecting Standard Oil's grip on the White House (bottom left) and Congress and State legislatures (top left and right) makes the point.

Carnegie and Rockefeller were devoted to the US way of business. They arose out of a grossly inequitable and unjust political and economic system. But their foundations have not consolidated such a system. While being ambassadors for the 'American way of life', these were and are mainly devoted to education, the arts, the sciences and public health. Carnegie libraries were created in many countries, and Rockefeller helped to found the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the Harvard School of Public Health, and the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, and similar institutions. These and other influential established foundations have not been agents of socialism, but on the whole they have promoted public goods.

Philanthrocapitalism is new

The concept, practice and impact of philanthrocapitalism is different. The term sounds as if it merely means a commitment by capitalists to us their money to do good. Certainly this is the impression given by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, as projected by the magazine covers below, selected from the many shown in my *WN* letter in February. The *Time* cover shows a somewhat dreamy, friendly face of a man who surely would give any buddy a dime or drop a penny in any poor man's hat, and who is able and willing to do this on a grand scale.



The projection of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation on the covers of magazines like these, gives a false impression. Philanthrocapitalism's business methods do little to combat inequity and injustice

But philanthrocapitalism, as now defined (1), has a more precise and troublesome meaning. It denotes the application of current dominant business theory and practice to public life. It is 'the tendency for a new breed of donors to conflate business aims with charitable endeavours, making philanthropy more cost-effective, impact-oriented, and financially profitable. Underpinning the rise of philanthrocapitalism is the idea that to do good socially, one must do well financially: public and private interest are… touted as intrinsically mutually compatible' (2).

Furthermore, the type of capitalism that remains rampant now has peculiar features. It still is wedded to the discredited political and economic theory of monetarism, whereby 'development', 'growth', and 'progress' are all judged by the amounts of money people, communities and countries get and spend. Thus a population with comparatively large amounts of money spent on ultra-processed energy-dense snack food and soft drinks, and therefore with high rates of obesity, diabetes, heart disease and other disabililities that cost money to treat, is for this reason more 'developed' than a healthy population that lives off the land and generally dies after short illnesses. As another example, any society whose publicly funded primary health care services are displaced by private suppliers, the costs of whose drugs, hospitals, medicine and surgery are paid by for insurance or out of the pockets of those directly affected, is for this reason 'growing' towards the goal of a 'mature market economy'.

This is the current context of capitalism. It judges quality – values – in terms of quantity – numbers. The more money, and the higher the return on capital invested, the better. The huge shareholdings of the Gates Foundation in Coca-Cola and McDonald's, outlined in *my January contribution to Feedback*, are a case in point. One reason for this may be that Bill Gates himself regularly drinks Coke™ and eats cheeseburgers. Another reason is that he and his financial advisors believe that these investments will give the biggest financial return. Given the Gates Foundation's declaration that it is driven by 'the 'interests and passions of the Gates family', Bill Gates has every reason – personal, financial and ideological – to want a world in which more people drink Coke™ and eat more McLunches and Happy Meals™ (3).

Linsey McGoey of the University of Essex, already quoted above, in a *critique of philanthrocapitalism* (4), points out: 'We observe very high rates of inequality at the

national and international level. We have seen an incredible enrichment of the wealthiest individuals on a global level, and there is a direct correlation between increased wealth accumulation, regressive tax measures, and funding towards philanthropic activities. Philanthropy may be growing, but only in the context of rampant inequality'. That is to say, philanthrocapitalism is a symptom of and also perpetuates the current world disorder.

The nature of Gates

That is the general idea. Now take the Gates Foundation. The evidence is that Bill Gates wants to fix the world in the same way as he runs his life and his corporation. Many people have dreams like this, but Bill Gates has such a vast amount of money that he can shape world affairs in any area that interests him. An obvious clue to his general direction is the nature of his business and the source of his success. Computer software is based on the digits 1 and 0, which is also to say, on and off, yes and no, white and black, good and bad. Bill Gates has projected his inner digital world into the outer world. With the Gates Foundation he continues to do so.

When charitable foundations are effective, when grant-holders are trusted to use their funds and resources in ways they judge are best, when the foundations spur governments, civil society and scientists to give more attention to justice, equity and public goods (5), and when they foster an increasing variety of appropriate initiatives that energise and empower communities, they are a force for good, and hopefully not just for the human species (6). On the whole these criteria apply to foundations such as Carnegie and Rockefeller. As a current example, the $US 10 million granted by Bloomberg Philanthropies enabled the Mexican public interest organisation *El Poder del Consumidor* (Consumer Power) to press the Mexican government to propose laws to tax ultra-processed products, including soft drink, and to do so successfully (7).

Seen in these lights the Gates Foundation is problematic. The uses of its funds are tightly controlled to conform to what the Gates trustees believe are best. It is widely thought that the vast amounts of money available from the Gates Foundation have become an excuse for governments to reduce their responsibilities to support relevant United Nations agencies, whose officials in relevant areas are increasingly at the bidding of Gates, as is the scientific community. To a greater extent than UN agencies and even other US aid organisations, the Gates Foundation is notoriously 'top-down' in its policies, imposing 'quick fix' and 'value for money' policies on projects that are amenable to such approaches, and neglecting areas that cannot be readily simplified.

Bill Gates personally and corporately is also notoriously dismissive of alternative views and antagonistic to different policies, and has no record of discussing or sharing proposals with the people most immediately affected. The one interpretation of the Gates Foundation style that is consistent with the facts and evidence, is that it

is applying the methods that have made Microsoft quasi-monopolistic in its private corporate business, to public health and the public good.

The 'value for money' policy is particularly problematic. Its rhetoric is impeccable. Of course it is true that the more efficiently and effectively material and other resources are used for the sustained benefit of the greatest number of people, with the fewest adverse effects on the living and physical world, the better. It is also true that overseas aid and development policies and practices have been, and largely still are, not well reasoned.

The hubris of the super-elites

But in practice the application of modern corporate methods based on the political and economic ideology that is destroying public services and trampling every kind of diversity, to public health and public life, is another disaster that has to be seen, faced, and blocked. The views so far expressed in this letter are not just those of one 'radical' or 'activist'. Kavita Ramdas is a senior scholar at Stanford University's Center on Development, Democracy and the Rule of Law, and previously chief executive officer of the Global Fund for Women, dedicated to the rights of women (8). She says:

> I am sceptical about what is likely to change as a result of philanthrocapitalism's focus on money, markets, measurement, and management. I am troubled by the hubris that often seems to lurk just below the surface of the good-citizen conscience of the very wealthy, and increasingly unnerved by the alignment of fashion, power, and celebrity behind it. Where is the evidence that philanthrocapitalism works? And are there better ways to achieve urgently needed global social progress?
>
> Despite many good intentions, this type of philanthropy seems poorly suited to resolve the world's most deep-rooted problems. This is because it is enmeshed in two contradictions. The first is that the more unequal the world gets, the more the public is being invited to celebrate a cherished few who benefit from this condition of inequality. We pour adulation on those among this new super-elite who have chosen to use some of their almost unfathomable wealth to address 'specific' problems with 'measurable' outcomes. What is missing is any deeper questioning about what ails a global economic system that seems to produce endemic inequality, crushing poverty, and food insecurity. The new philanthropy avoids exploring what is wrong at this systemic level – where a single individual's net worth can become larger than the combined GDPs of some of the world's poorest nations.
>
> Even as the significant downsides of so-called 'development' in the global North become ever clearer (among them unsustainable consumption patterns and financial freefall caused by lack of regulation), philanthrocapitalism in its current form seeks to invest in efforts and initiatives that can bring the wonders of this model of development to people and communities around the globe. The more the West learns about the drawbacks of industrial agriculture, excessive dependence on fossil fuels, the fallibility of nuclear power, and the poor health outcomes related to current sedentary forms of life, the more

> determined it is to share its successful development strategies with others. And, the new super-elites of the developing world and the governments they influence are no less keen to adopt the patterns that seemed to work so well for the global North.
>
> Current philanthropic practice is driven by the need to find technological solutions, the same 'fix-the-problem' mentality that allowed business people to succeed as hedge-fund managers, capital-market investors, or software-developers. This approach is designed to yield measurable and fairly quick solutions. A symptom of this may be found in the kind of skills that new foundations are seeking. I am struck by how few social scientists are employed at the new 'mega-philanthropies.' Instead, the people most sought after are management consultants, business people, former industry leaders or lobbyists, and scientists. Each of these is expected to bring a crisp and coolly efficient approach to their work. The nuance and inherent humility of the social sciences – the realisation that development has to do with people, with human and social complexity, with cultural and traditional realities, and their willingness to struggle with the messy and multifaceted aspects of a problem – have no cachet in this metrics-driven, efficiency-seeking, technology-focused approach to social change'.

Wealthy powerful capitalists sometimes have become interested in using their money in ways that do not generate the usual type of profit. Andrew Carnegie and John D Rockefeller are examples. Bill Gates is projected as an updated version. But he is not. There are differences, as shown here. In effect even if not in intention, the Gates Foundation has given Bill Gates great power in world public affairs, and he is a strange person.

References and notes

1 Bishop M, Green M. *Philanthrocapitalism: How The Rich Can Save The World*. London, Bloomsbury, 2008.

2 McGoey L. Philanthrocapitalism and its critics. *Poetics* 2012, **40**, 2, 185-199.

3 Part of the success of transnational corporations is their ownership of brand names protected by law worldwide. Thus the McDonald's site states: 'The following trademarks used herein are owned by the McDonald's Corporation and its affiliates: 365Black, America's Favorite Fries, Arch Card, Big Breakfast, Big Mac, Big N' Tasty, Birdie, Birdie the Early Bird Design, Black History Makers of Tomorrow, CBO, Changing. Together., Chicken McNuggets, Chicken Selects, Cinnamon Melts, Egg McMuffin, Extra Value Meal, Extra Value Menu, Filet-O-Fish, Fish McBites, French Fry Box Design, Give a Hand, Golden Arches, Golden Arches Logo, Good Time, Great Taste, Gospelfest, Grimace and Design, HACER, Hamburglar and Design, Hamburger University, Happy Meal, Happy Meal Box Design, Have You Had Your Break Today?, Healthy Growing Up, I'm lovin' it, "It's what I eat and what I do", Immunize for Healthy Lives, Mac Attack, Mac Tonight and Design, Made For You, McCafé, McChicken, MCDirect Shares, McDonaldland, McDonald's, All American High School Basketball Game, McDonald's Building Designs, McDouble, McExpress, McFamily, McFlurry, McFranchise, McGriddles, McHappy Day, McHero, McJobs, McMemories, McNuggets, McPollo, McRecycle USA, McRib, McScholar, McScholar of the Year, McSkillet, McDonald's Internet Logo, me encanta, McWorld, Mighty Kids Meal, Mighty Wings, Morning Mac, Passport to Play, Passport to Play Logo,

PlayPlace, Quarter Pounder, RMHC, Ronald McDonald and Design, Ronald McDonald House, Ronald McDonald House Charities, Sausage McGriddles, Sausage McMuffin, See What We're Made Of, Shamrock Shake, Single Arch Logo, Snack Wrap, Speedee Logo, The House That Love Built Design, Triple Thick, twoallbeefpattiesspecialsaucelettucecheesepicklesonionononasesameseedbun, We Love To See You Smile, What's On Your Plate, World Famous Fries, You Deserve a Break Today'.

4 McGoey L. Philanthrocapitalism, the Gates Foundation and global health. *Innovations in Context,* 2013. *Access pdf here*

5 Kaul I, Grunberg I, Stern M. *Global Public Goods. International Cooperation in the 21st Century*. UN Development Programme. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

6 Given the need to see humans as one species in the living world, within the biosphere, the term 'philanthropy' needs a rethink.

7 Gomes F. *Big Food Watch*. Taxes on ultra-processed products. Mexico makes a move. *[Update]. World Nutrition* October-December 2013, **4,** 8, 602-606. *Access pdf here*

8 Ramdas K. Philanthrocapitalism is not social change philanthropy. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, December 2011. http://www.ssireview.org/point_counterpoint/philanthrocapitalism

Claudio Schuftan
Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
Email: cschuftan@phmovement.org

*Schuftan C. The Gates Foundation. Beware geeks bearing gifts [Feedback]. World Nutrition March 2014, **5,** 3, 293-299*

How to respond

Feedback is edited by Isabela Sattamini. Please address letters for publication to wn.letters@gmail.com. Letters usually respond to or comment on contributions to *World Nutrition*. More general letters will also be considered. Usual length for main text of letters is between 250 and 850 words but they can be shorter or longer. Any references should usually be limited to up to 12. Letters are edited for length and style, may be shortened or developed, and once edited are sent to the author for approval.