

The *Australian Paradox* paper shredded in formal journal; falsified data to the fore

Rory Robertson, 20 August 2013

Greetings readers,

The latest news is that five University of Western Australia researchers - including a 30-year veteran of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) - have confirmed my observation that the University of Sydney's "peer reviewed" claim of an "Australian Paradox" is factually incorrect, to put it kindly: <http://www.biomedcentral.com/content/pdf/1471-2458-13-668.pdf>

This is further confirmation that the self-published *Australian Paradox* paper would never have been published in a real journal with real quality control. When I say "**self-published**", I mean that the lead author of the spectacularly faulty paper – with an obviously false conclusion - also was the "Guest Editor" of the publishing journal: http://www.mdpi.com/journal/nutrients/special_issues/carbohydrates

The University of Sydney's Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research), Professor Jill Trehwella, and I had a lively discussion last year about whether that means quality control in this case is consistent with "internationally accepted standard practice": <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/Sept2012-Conversations.pdf>

1. Recapping the *Australian Paradox* "finding" and the University of Sydney's conflicts of interest

To recap, the nonsense-based *Australian Paradox* claim is that there was "a consistent and substantial decline" in (added) sugar consumption by Australians between 1980 and 2010, as obesity surged. Accordingly, there is "an inverse relationship" between sugar consumption and obesity. Yes eat less sugar, and get fatter.

And what are the policy implications? Well, to the authors - the University of Sydney's highest-profile nutrition scientists, pop-sci diet-book authors and food-industry service providers, Dr Alan Barclay (AWB) and Professor Jennie Brand-Miller (JBM) - they were obvious: "**The findings challenge the implicit assumption that taxes and other measures to reduce intake of soft drinks will be an effective strategy in global efforts to reduce obesity**".

That's the final sentence of the *Australian Paradox* paper. And did anyone like that "finding"? Well, yes, they did. One global softdrink seller in particular loves "**peer reviewed**" science, **University-of-Sydney style** : <http://www.smh.com.au/national/health/research-causes-stir-over-sugars-role-in-obesity-20120330-1w3e5.html>

Indeed, not only is modern sugar consumption - including via sugary drinks – innocent of driving bulging obesity rates, but AWB and JBM in their big-selling pop-sci diet books **also exonerated added sugar of being a key driver of type 2 diabetes**: "There is absolute consensus that sugar in food does not cause diabetes"
<http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/diabetes.pdf>

Sure, why not. There's a debate about the extent to which sugar and sugary products are key drivers of obesity and type 2 diabetes, so why not simply write: "There is absolute consensus that sugar in food does not cause diabetes"? Well, because that is a reckless false statement. That's all: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/17/magazine/mag-17Sugar-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

Extraordinarily, the University of Sydney – its scientists supported by its senior management - has recklessly attempted to (falsely) exonerate added sugar – and sugary drinks - as a menace to public health, while operating a pro-sugar **Glycemic Index (GI) business** that exists in part to charge food companies up to \$6,000 a pop to stamp particular sugar and sugary products as Healthy: pp. 10-11 <http://www.gisymbol.com.au/cmsAdmin/uploads/Glycemic-Index-Foundation-Healthy-Choices-Brochure.pdf> ; p. 5
[http://www.foodhealthdialogue.gov.au/internet/foodandhealth/publishing.nsf/Content/D59B2C8391006638CA2578E600834BBD/\\$File/Resources%20and%20support%20for%20reformulation%20activities.pdf](http://www.foodhealthdialogue.gov.au/internet/foodandhealth/publishing.nsf/Content/D59B2C8391006638CA2578E600834BBD/$File/Resources%20and%20support%20for%20reformulation%20activities.pdf)

Notably, the University of Sydney's low-GI business is a **commercial partner of the Australian sugar industry**, helping it in 2008 to produce a new brand of sugar: <http://www.crsugar.com.au/Better-For-You-Products/CSR-LoGiCane-LowGI-Sugar.aspx> ; <http://www.logicane.com/Partners>

In my opinion, the University of Sydney's reckless attempt to falsely exonerate added sugar - especially sugary softdrinks - is a menace to public health. After all, before the original paper was self-published in 2011, there was **strong evidence that sugary softdrinks are a key driver of obesity and type 2 diabetes**: <http://care.diabetesjournals.org/content/33/11/2477.full.pdf>

While the *Australian Paradox* paper increasingly is seen by objective observers as a joke that is not funny, non-conflicted readers can still enjoy AWB and JBM's latest false defence of their ridiculously faulty paper: pp. 9-10 in <http://www.biomedcentral.com/content/pdf/1471-2458-13-668.pdf>

The humour in this latest episode is not as obvious as the infamous "The cars not humans are consuming the sugar" episode of 2012 - <http://www.smh.com.au/business/pesky-economist-wont-let-big-sugar-lie-20120725-22pru.html> - but it's good to see that AWB and JBM still are in there fighting with straight faces, still racking up points for "persistent negligence".

2. Falsified data to the fore

For the first time, AWB and JBM have touched on the remarkably flat falsified green lines in Charts 21 and 22 at <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/22Slideshowaustraliangoestoparadoxcanberrafinal.pdf>

That is, in response to the UWA researchers Ridders *et al* demolishing their faulty paper in a formal journal, AWB and JBM were forced to remark upon the remarkably flat falsified line upon which they had chosen not to remark previously, in their two earlier formal self-publications (*Australian Paradox* and *Australian Paradox Revisited*).

One of the extraordinary aspects of the *Australian Paradox* scandal has been that AWB and JBM - supposedly wrestling with a "paradox" - never thought to remark upon the most remarkable things in this episode.

I say remarkable because, as many readers are well aware, perhaps the rarest thing in nature – and thus rare in real-life scientific observations of humans, animals and plants - is a dead-straight flat line. Indeed, the term "flat-lining" is associated with things not living but dead.

In the negligent *Australian Paradox* paper, it turns out that the flat-lining data series was a correct hint of falsified figures. In fact, AWB and JBM's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) sugar series is conspicuously flat in the 2000s because the FAO began falsifying its Australian series after 1998-99, after the ABS discontinued as unreliable its apparent consumption series: <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/FAOfalsifiedsugar.pdf>

That is, after spoon-feeding apparent consumption of sugar data to the FAO for decades, the ABS after 1998-99 simply stopped counting, stopped providing data to the FAO and everyone else. So there are no valid data after 1998-99. Full stop. The FAO responded for several years by simply writing down the ABS figures from 1998-99. That is why we have falsified flat lines in the early 2000s in AWB and JBM's preferred chart, the chart on which their false *Australian Paradox* "finding" is recklessly based.

Anyway, in response to Ridders *et al*, AWB and JBM claimed – either cluelessly or disingenuously - that "**...the data for the 4-year period 1999–2003 now appear to have been underestimated**" (p. 10 of <http://www.biomedcentral.com/content/pdf/1471-2458-13-668.pdf>).

No, not underestimated. Falsified. As they have been from the very start of this scandal. Those FAO data – those conspicuously flat-lining falsified figures for 2000-2003 - were falsified at the time of AWB and JBM's initial self-publication back in 2011 and they still are falsified today (see FAO link above).

Readers, the *Australian Paradox* claim is very specific: “a consistent and substantial decline” in sugar consumption “over the past 30 years”, from 1980 to 2010. My simple observation – the one I have been making for 18 months - is that the under-supervised authors have presented no valid evidence for that “finding” and the paper would never have been published in a real journal with real quality control.

After all, evidence for such a finding would come in the form of various valid indicators of per-capita sugar consumption trending down between 1980 and 2010. When I say "valid", I mean "not falsified". Yet a series of authors’ own published charts – Figures 1-4 in www.australianparadox.com - trend up not down! And the authors’ preferred series - in Charts 21 and 22 in the Canberra link above - features falsified flat-lining figures.

Now, the scandal is not so much that AWB and JBM self-published an incompetent assessment of the available information, it's their ongoing refusal to acknowledge the obvious: that the valid evidence does not trend down. Nor have they engaged properly on the question of the clearly falsified FAO figures.

Readers, most experienced analysts would have been cautious about embracing a data series in 2011 that the ABS had discontinued as unreliable a decade earlier, after 60 years! Furthermore, there is a fairly widespread view amongst serious scientists across the globe - and I assume across the Group of Eight universities - that there is no role for falsified data in "peer reviewed" science.

Even the discredited e-journal *Nutrients* says it has a “zero tolerance policy” towards falsified data - although it has done nothing about the flat-lining falsified figures that feature in the faulty *Australian Paradox* paper.

Journalists, why not phone a sample of our Group of Eight Vice-Chancellors – here they are: <http://www.go8.edu.au/go8-members/go8-board> - and enquire about their policy on the use of falsified data in “peer reviewed” science?

3. More “persistent negligence” and why this all matters

Readers, competent observers increasingly view modern rates of sugar consumption - including via sugary drinks - as a key driver of global obesity and type 2 diabetes, together the greatest public-health challenge of our times: <http://care.diabetesjournals.org/content/33/11/2477.full.pdf> ; <http://www.rethinksugarydrink.org.au/> ; <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/Sugary-Drinks-Ban.pdf>

The truth remains that there is no real evidence, no reliable data for the *Australian Paradox* “finding”, complicating attempts by University of Sydney’s highest-profile nutritionists and food-industry service providers to falsely exonerate added sugar – and particularly sugary drinks - as a menace to public health (“The findings challenge the implicit assumption that taxes and other measures to reduce intake of soft drinks will be an effective strategy in global efforts to reduce obesity”).

Australia's only ever widely trusted nutritionist, Dr Rosemary Stanton, a year ago confirmed publicly that there is "no evidence" for the University of Sydney's always-unlikely claim: Slide 18 in <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/22Slideshowaustraliangoestoparadoxcanberrafinal.pdf>

Even Figure 8 in AWB and JBM's latest faulty defence of the "shonky sugar study" shows "**GreenPool: Aparrent [sic] consumption**" **basically flat since the mid-1980s**. I say basically flat because it wiggles either side of a flat line for a quarter-century: p. 9 of <http://www.biomedcentral.com/content/pdf/1471-2458-13-668.pdf>

Yet on AWB and JBM’s shonky website sponsored by the University of Sydney, the under-supervised scientists claim that “a new independent review of Australian's [sic] sugar consumption indicates that it is still continuing to decline”. Sorry, but my chart in the next link shows again that this is complete nonsense: <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/JBM-AWB-AustralianParadox.pdf> via <http://www.glycemicindex.com/>

I should not have to lecture the whole of the University of Sydney - where are the real scientists and competent administrators? - that the series being flat for a quarter of a century obviously contradicts the (false) claim of "a consistent and substantial decline" in sugar consumption "over the past 30 years", from 1980 to 2010.

Meanwhile, don't worry about the mis-spelling of "Aparrent" above, or "Roberston" in *Australian Paradox Revisited* (bottom of page 3 at <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/nutrients-03-00491-s003.pdf>). After all, the self-published work of the University of Sydney's high-profile, low-GI, pro-sugar food-industry service providers has more problems with simple maths, falsified data and confusing up versus down than it has with mis-spelling. I shall have more to say on all that in coming weeks.

But, again, I should not have to lecture the whole of the University of Sydney. Where are the real scientists and the competent administrators? Let's have this clownish self-published *Australian Paradox* paper corrected or retracted before this thing turns ugly.

In June, I brought this matter to the attention of noted scientific-integrity campaigner Dr David Vaux - see comments in <http://theconversation.com/from-fraud-to-fair-play-australia-must-support-research-integrity-15733> - but he appears to have been quite busy with another similarly important matter: <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2013/s3823977.htm>

I've also recently put the matter in front of the National Health and Medical Research Council: see comments in https://theconversation.com/how-we-deal-with-alleged-research-misconduct-nhmrc-17101#comment_203994

4. University of Sydney's Charles Perkins Centre, the Group of Eight and the negligent *Australian Paradox* paper

Again, modern rates of sugar consumption - including via sugary drinks - are a key driver of global obesity and type 2 diabetes, together the greatest public-health challenge of our times: <http://care.diabetesjournals.org/content/33/11/2477.full.pdf>

Importantly, outsized rates of sugar consumption – alongside alcohol and tobacco – are a major driver of the unacceptable "gap" in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians: see the bottom row of Box/Table 2 and "Comments" in <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2013/198/7/characteristics-community-level-diet-aboriginal-people-remote-northern-australia> ; <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4724.0.55.001Main%20Features42004-05>

I am outraged that the unreliable authors of the *Australian Paradox* paper – also the world's foremost advocates of the pro-sugar Glycemic Index (GI) approach to nutrition – are set to move into the University of Sydney's new \$500 million Charles Perkins Centre for the study of obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease. In my opinion, the Charles Perkins Centre begins its life with a dark cloud over the University's commitment to competence and integrity in scientific research.

"A 50,000-square-metre building housing lecture halls and close to 1000 researchers will be the hub of the project, named in honour of Charles Perkins, the first Aboriginal man to graduate from university": <http://www.smh.com.au/national/university-sets-up-500m-centre-for-obesity-research-20130724-2qjq8.html>

Some obscure history gives a stronger sense of where I am coming from. Charles Perkins was born in Alice Springs in the Northern Territory in 1936. I was born in Alice Springs in 1966. I grew up with Aboriginal kids in various parts of Australia, and my father (born 1933) says he knew Charles Perkins and his brother briefly when they all were young men in the 1950s. My mum, as a nursing Sister, cared for Aboriginal people in remote communities in the Northern Territory and the north of South Australia in the 1960s, and elsewhere as we traipsed from place to place, from State to State, around country Australia in the 1970s and 1980s (see school photo at <http://www.australianparadox.com/baralaba.htm> and some early history in Section 4. of <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/Sugary-Drinks-Ban.pdf>).

I am outraged because the University of Sydney's highest-profile obesity and diabetes researchers - soon to move into the Charles Perkins Centre – are those who self-published the spectacularly faulty *Australian Paradox* paper and who have recklessly (falsely) sought to exonerate as harmless a major contributor to the unacceptable “gap” in life expectancy between Charles Perkins’s First Peoples and non-Indigenous Australians.

Again, the University of Sydney’s \$500 million Charles Perkins Centre begins its life with a serious cloud over the competence and integrity of its research, because it is set to house the influential yet highly conflicted low-GI advocates who have recklessly sought to (falsely) exonerate added sugar – including in sugary drinks - as a menace to public health, despite it clearly being a major dietary factor in the outsized rate of health problems and premature deaths amongst Indigenous and other information-poor Australians.

In my opinion, the only person associated with GI who should be allowed into the Charles Perkins Centre is GI himself:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greg_Inglis

Now that I am getting warmed up, I must say that as a taxpayer I’m also outraged that **Australia's Group of Eight universities** is advertising the claim that "research intensive universities" are really special - and so should receive specially elevated public funding, for the good of the nation, you understand - while doing absolutely nothing about the fact that the senior management of one its delinquent member universities is defending a self-published, error-laden and nonsense-based paper as top-shelf "peer reviewed" science: <http://www.go8.edu.au/university-staff/go8-policy-and-analysis/2013/discussion-paper-the-role-and-importance-of-research-intensive-universities>

By the way, here’s the article that started all this: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/health-science/a-spoonful-of-sugar-is-not-so-bad/story-e6frg8y6-1226090126776> Here’s the NHMRC’s long-considered response: <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/canberradietary.pdf>

And here’s my response to that piece in *The Australian* : <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/letters/there-is-life-after-sugar/story-fn558imw-1226092644963>

And here's Dr Eric Clapton on sugar addiction: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kVPmfMDFS9A>

On a more upbeat note, here's **Professor Bruce Springsteen** aging gracefully - all excellent until the final sentences (get your tickets for coming tour!): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-qZbyLsiHzY>

rgds,
 rory

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rory robertson
economist and former-fattie
now fairly fructose free! 😊

Join the push to give all kids a fairer start in life: <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/Sugary-Drinks-Ban.pdf>

www.strathburn.com

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