

Sunday, 27 October 2013

University of Sydney's *Australian Paradox* fraud spreads to *BMC Public Health* journal, overseen by scientists at Harvard, Stanford, Johns Hopkins universities, et al

Dear Members of the Board of BioMed Central and officials of *BMC Public Health* (and outside observers),

Good morning/afternoon/evening. My name is Rory Robertson. I regret having to write to inform you that your *BMC Public Health* journal has become entangled in the University of Sydney's *Australian Paradox* fraud. I am writing to alert you, and to encourage you to conduct an urgent investigation into this matter.

For a year and a half, I have been arguing near and far for the correction or retraction of the notorious *Australian Paradox* paper, an extraordinarily faulty paper (self) published in the MDPI journal *Nutrients* by highly conflicted University of Sydney scientists and food-industry service providers: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/health/research-causes-stir-over-sugars-role-in-obesity-20120330-1w3e5.html> ; <http://www.smh.com.au/business/pesky-economist-wont-let-big-sugar-lie-20120725-22pru.html>

The University of Sydney's influential scientists falsely claim to have documented "an inverse relationship" between sugar consumption and obesity. Unreasonably, for the past year and a half, they have pretended that my correct critique of their faulty paper is mistaken. Meanwhile, the University of Sydney's senior management has not yet properly responded to my evidence that the *Australian Paradox* episode is a clear case of Research Misconduct: Sections 1-10 in <http://www.australianparadox.com/>

With all that as the backdrop, I was disturbed recently to discover that *BMC Public Health* - <http://www.biomedcentral.com/bmcpublichealth/> - has published **without proper scrutiny** a further effort by these University of Sydney authors to convey the false impression that their extraordinarily faulty paper is flawless: pp. 9-10 at <http://www.biomedcentral.com/content/pdf/1471-2458-13-668.pdf> and <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/13/898/>

As discussed below, at least two misleading defences of the notorious *Australian Paradox* paper have been published in your *BMC Public Health* journal. My concern is about the need to ensure the veracity of information published in "peer reviewed" journals by influential food-industry service providers, and then promoted in critical public debates on the origins of obesity and type 2 diabetes, together the greatest public-health challenge of our times. Reckless misinformation should not be given a leg to stand on.

2. Readers, is this sort of recklessness with facts okay?

For those who wonder if the efforts of influential University of Sydney scientists could possibly be as hopeless as I claim, please consider an obesity-related discussion on Australian national radio two weeks ago:

"JENNIE BRAND-MILLER [lead author of the *Australian Paradox* paper]: It irritates me, frankly, to see that soft drinks are getting special mention yet again. Soft drinks are clearly a problem in US. American children drink about 10 times as much soft drink as our children do here in Australia. America has a problem. We don't. And there is very, very little support for the idea that Australian children are putting on weight because of soft drink." <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2013/s3868327.htm>

Ten times? Are Australian children on average really drinking 90% fewer sugary softdrinks and energy drinks than American children? No, of course not. Not in your wildest dreams. My best guess is that Professor Brand-Miller's "about 10 times" estimate is wrong by a factor of five or more: http://assets.coca-colacompany.com/ba/22/39fae0564dcda20c694be368b8cf/TCCC_2010_Annual_Review_Per_Capita_Consumption.pdf

That sort of recklessness with facts is a feature of the *Australian Paradox* paper. In my opinion, those who care about the reputation of *BMC Public Health* journal - and BioMed Central, The Open Access Publisher - would be smart to immediately begin an investigation into the origins and quality of the clownish *Australian Paradox* paper that now is being defended as flawless - with a straight face - in your journal.

I urge a formal investigation. I suggest you read carefully my *GraphicEvidence* link below. Sections 2 and 5 should be sufficient to provide a strong sense of what I am talking about. Importantly, there is a great deal of shonky science in the news lately - for example, <http://retractionwatch.wordpress.com/2013/10/03/science-reporter-spoofs-hundreds-of-journals-with-a-fake-paper/> - and your BMC "brand" is at risk of being one of the next cabs off the rank.

Also, I note that this slowly inflating *Australian Paradox* scandal is being enjoyed at a distance by many of our friends in the media. My preferred outcome, following your investigation, would be for BioMed Central to write formal letters to the authors, the MDPI journal *Nutrients* and the University of Sydney – all cc'ed above - to insist that they must correct or retract their hopelessly flawed paper.

3. What is "The Australian Paradox", and how come authors' own published charts point up not down?

For those new to this scandal, the story begins in 2011, when two of the University of Sydney's influential scientists and food-industry service providers - Professor Jennie Brand-Miller (JBM) and Dr Alan Barclay (AWB; also Head of Research at the Australian Diabetes Council) - published a "peer reviewed" study in the MDPI journal *Nutrients* that featured the "finding" that there is **"an inverse relationship" between sugar consumption and obesity** - "The Australian Paradox".

Unfortunately, the *Australian Paradox* paper - in particular, its claim to have documented **"a consistent and substantial decline" in refined or added sugar consumption in Australia "over the past 30 years [1980 to 2010]"** - is extraordinarily faulty. Keep in mind that specific "finding": "a consistent and substantial decline" between 1980 to 2010.

Readers, on the evidence from their own published charts, JBM and AWB's major errors and misinterpretations are obvious and dominating: they falsely claim that up is down (Figures 1-5) and that trivial is substantial (Figure 6 versus 6a), while promoting falsified data as fact (Figures 7-10): <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/GraphicEvidence.pdf>

Again, the University of Sydney scientists' valid charts - the ones that do not contain falsified data - tend to trend up not down in the relevant 1980 to 2010 timeframe.

So, how was such a faulty paper ever published? I do not know. It is worth noting, however, that the University of Sydney's extraordinarily faulty *Australian Paradox* paper was **self-published**, in the sense that JBM was both the lead author and the "Guest Editor" of the publishing journal: http://www.mdpi.com/journal/nutrients/special_issues/carbohydrates

Readers, please note also - because this becomes important below - that the Australian sugar industry in 2012 commissioned, funded and "framed" what I've called a "shonky sugar series" to try to rescue the University of Sydney's faulty *Australian Paradox* paper. The owner of that series also recently published his opinions on this matter in your *BMC Public Health* (more on that below).

4. University of Sydney's recklessness with facts and its business links to Australian sugar industry

The *Australian Paradox* paper was designed to exonerate modern sugar consumption - including via sugary drinks - as a key driver of obesity, and was used by the sugary food and beverage industries in an attempt to kill the Australian government's plan to toughen dietary advice against added sugar: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/health/research-causes-stir-over-sugars-role-in-obesity-20120330-1w3e5.html> ; <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/health-science/a-spoonful-of-sugar-is-not-so-bad/story-e6frg8y6-1226090126776>

According to the University of Sydney's influential scientists and food-industry service providers, not only do modern rates of sugar consumption have nothing to do with obesity, but these big-selling authors - 3.5 million low-GI diet books sold - also have exonerated sugar as a driver of type 2 diabetes: "There is absolute consensus that sugar in food does not cause diabetes": <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/diabetes.pdf>

Of course, that is news to many of the rest of us: <http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0057873> ; <http://care.diabetesjournals.org/content/33/11/2477.full.pdf>

Why have JBM and AWB been allowed by their University of Sydney bosses to continue exaggerating their *Australian Paradox* "evidence" that modern rates of sugar consumption have nothing to do with obesity? <http://www.rethinksugarydrink.org.au/facts> ; <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/17/magazine/mag-17Sugar-t.html?pagewanted=all&r=0> ; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDaYa0AB8TQ&feature=youtu.be>

Perhaps the University of Sydney's determination to exonerate sugar as a menace to public health has something to do with the fact that the University of Sydney's pro-sugar Glycemic Index (GI) business in 2009 "partnered" with the Australian sugar industry to develop a new brand of sugar: <http://www.logicane.com/Partners> ; <http://www.gisymbol.com/category/products/>

Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that JBM and AWB operate the University of Sydney's pro-sugar GI business that exists in part to charge food companies up to \$6,000 a pop to stamp particular brands of sugar and sugary foods as Healthy: pp. 5-6 of [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) (if that link does not work, please google: "barclay glycemic reformulating").

I do not know. What I do know is that the *Australian Paradox* paper is extraordinarily faulty, and that the fraudulent claim that the paper is flawless now is infecting your *BMC Public Health* journal.

5. A determined effort to insist that obvious and serious errors do not exist

In my opinion, it is unacceptable for influential scientists to refuse to correct obvious errors and misinterpretations in a "peer reviewed" paper, choosing instead to pretend their obviously faulty paper is flawless. To be clear, the "fraud" to which I refer involves the authors' determined efforts to defend - now in two formal journals - their obviously faulty paper as flawless.

Please consider two obvious faults documented in Section 2 of my *GraphicEvidence* link above: the "~600 g per person per year" error (correction: ~150 g) and "decreased by 10%" error (correction: "increased by 30%").

Is there any good reason for those blatant errors not to have been formally corrected alongside the authors' earlier formal correction of clumsy tangles in referencing? <http://www.mdpi.com/2072-6643/3/8/734>

No, there is not. In my opinion, by refusing to correct the obvious errors and misinterpretations in their paper, JBM and AWB are deliberately exaggerating their evidence that modern sugar consumption - including via sugary drinks - is harmless.

For reasons unknown, the world's foremost Glycemic Index advocates are exaggerating the University of Sydney's "evidence" that sugar - 50% of which is super-low-GI=19 fructose - is harmless in modern doses, when it is increasingly clear that modern rates of sugar consumption - including via sugary drinks - are a key driver of global obesity, type 2 diabetes and heart disease: <http://care.diabetesjournals.org/content/33/11/2477.full.pdf> ; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDaYa0AB8TQ&feature=youtu.be>

Again, JBM and AWB are exaggerating their evidence that modern sugar consumption is harmless while operating the University of Sydney's Glycemic Index business that collects revenue for stamping sugar and sugary products as Healthy: Slide 12 of <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/22Slideshowaustraliangoestoparadoxcanberrafinal.pdf>

Despite me documenting the obvious problems, large and small, the University of Sydney has chosen to pretend that there are no serious errors and that the paper is flawless "peer reviewed" science. In my opinion, that is fraud: Sections 7 and 8 in <http://www.australianparadox.com/>

6. Sugar industry's attempted rescue of its underperforming University of Sydney business partner

Separately, I note that Green Pool Commodity Specialists - a consultant to the Australian sugar industry among other things - also was recently published in your *BMC Public Health* journal: <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/13/668/comments#1755697>

The background here is that, in 2012, the Australian sugar industry commissioned, funded and "framed" a nonsense-based sugar series in an effort to rescue the notorious *Australian Paradox* paper produced by its underperforming University of Sydney GI business partner: <http://www.logicane.com/Partners>

Green Pool's instructions from the sugar industry were to "update" the official sugar series that the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) had published for 60 years before discontinuing it as unreliable after 1998-99. This is the **remarkable data dead-end on which AWB and JBM did not remark let alone discuss in the original *Australian Paradox* paper.**

This ABS apparent consumption series is the sucrose series – ending at 1998-99 - that was falsified by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) for the early 2000s. That's why there's a [conspicuously flat green line in the early 2000s](http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/FAOfalsifiedsugar.pdf) in JBM and AWB's paper: <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/FAOfalsifiedsugar.pdf>

One of my complaints is that JBM and AWB have never discussed [the FAO's falsified flat green line segment](http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/22Slideshowaustraliangoestoparadoxcanberrafinal.pdf) sitting unnoticed and unremarked in their *Australian Paradox* paper's Figure 2 A (p. 495). **Readers, it's not a paradox: it's simply a remarkable falsified flat line** (see Section 3 in my *GraphicEvidence* link and Charts 21 and 22 in <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/22Slideshowaustraliangoestoparadoxcanberrafinal.pdf>)

In "updating" the ABS series beyond 1998-99 for the sugar industry's peak body, Green Pool was instructed to rely on the same broken counting methodologies that the ABS had abandoned as outdated and unreliable. As Green Pool itself observes:

Virtually all factors have largely been left as per ABS calculation, since an update of all data would require a large scale study of both the composition of imports of food into Australia and representative food compositional data for imports and exports of all categories - which is no longer collected by ABS.

p. 14 of http://greenpoolcommodities.com/files/8113/4932/3223/121004_Sugar_Consumption_in_Australia_-_A_Statistical_Update_-_Public_Release_Document.pdf

Yes, the sugar industry is happy to pretend that the abandoned ABS series was "just resting", "stunned" or "pining for the fjords". Yes, the sugar industry has disingenuously sought to nail the ABS "Dead Parrot" sugar series back onto its perch. Yes, it is a joke. But I reckon Monty Python did it much better: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CIRBMt4eiRk>

Despite the sugar industry's disingenuous efforts, its "shonky sugar series" - produced by Green Pool as instructed - still shows a flat-to-up trend – not a downtrend - over the past couple of decades, again contradicting the faulty *Australian Paradox* claim: <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/Sugarindustry-uni-sugarstudy25.pdf>

7. Summary - and an appeal for help

Readers, the *Australian Paradox* "finding" of "a consistent and substantial decline in total refined or added sugar consumption by Australians over the past 30 years [1980 and 2010]" is nonsense, according to the authors' own published charts. That is, their valid charts - the ones that don't rely on falsified data - tend to trend up not down in the relevant timeframe. There also are simple but important arithmetic errors.

The obvious problems with the University of Sydney's *Australian Paradox* paper should have been corrected immediately. The underperforming authors should not have defended their obviously faulty paper as flawless in two "peer reviewed" journals – MDPI's *Nutrients* (2012) and *BMC Public Health* (2013): <http://www.smh.com.au/business/pesky-economist-wont-let-big-sugar-lie-20120725-22pru.html>

My *GraphicEvidence* link documents the *Australian Paradox* fraud in great detail. Section 2 highlights some of the most-obvious problems - including the ridiculous claim of an inverse relationship between sugary softdrink consumption and obesity - while Section 5 documents some of the particular problems with what has been published in your *BMC Public Health* journal so far: <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/GraphicEvidence.pdf>

Given that background of published misinformation, the University of Sydney's GI-business links to the sugar and sugary food and beverage industries are somewhat unsettling: <http://www.logicane.com/Partners> ; <http://www.motherjones.com/environment/2012/10/sugar-industry-lies-campaign>

Notably, the authors of the extraordinarily faulty *Australian Paradox* paper are giants in their particular field. Professor Jennie Brand-Miller - 3.5 million low-GI diet books sold - is at the forefront of global efforts to promote the (low) Glycemic Index as a useful way of assessing the health benefits of sugary processed food and drink products: <http://www.gisymbol.com/products-2/>

Co-author Dr Alan Barclay is Head of Research at the Australian Diabetes Council and Chief Scientist at the Glycemic Index Foundation, the University of Sydney's business that exists in part to charge food and beverage companies up to \$6,000 a pop to stamp particular brands of sugar and sugary low-GI products as Healthy (4. above).

Of course, to the extent that sugar is a menace to public health, the low-GI approach is somewhat dangerous, because the "sweet poison" half of sugar is super-low-GI=19 fructose: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HMKbhbW-Y3c&feature=c4-overview-vl&list=PL0B44DF914C4FB3ED> ; <http://www.diabetes.co.uk/diabetes-forum/viewtopic.php?f=18&t=30245&sid=a518ce7ed99c06814e4268a42cabd5e9>

For those who perhaps consider it a stretch for a simple economist to critique the pro-sugar publications of senior scientists whose main jobs appear to be operating a pro-sugar Glycemic Index business, please note that the core of **my dispute with the University of Sydney is not about science or nutrition, it's about up versus down, valid versus invalid/falsified data and the need to correct basic arithmetic and other errors** in formal "peer reviewed" journals. In fact, as an applied macroeconomist with a quarter of a century's worth of experience, I'm playing on my home ground.

1. My concerns about **the original *Australian Paradox*** paper heightened when it became clear that the extraordinarily faulty manuscript had been self-published in 2011 without competent scrutiny, with the lead author also operating as the "Guest Editor" of the publishing journal: http://www.mdpi.com/journal/nutrients/special_issues/carbohydrates
2. Soon after, I was appalled in early 2012 when the extraordinarily faulty paper was defended as flawless in ***Australian Paradox Revisited*** in *Nutrients* journal, again without competent scrutiny. In my opinion, the fact that the University of Sydney's underperforming food-industry service providers got plenty of simple little stuff wrong assists my claim that they got plenty of simple big stuff wrong as well. Readers, please spell "Roberston" in the final paragraph on page 3: <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/nutrients-03-00491-s003.pdf>
3. And now the extraordinary faulty self-published paper is being defended again with a straight face - and again without proper scrutiny: spell "Aparrent" in Figure 8 of the next link - **this time in *BMC Public Health***: pp. 9-10 at <http://www.biomedcentral.com/content/pdf/1471-2458-13-668.pdf> ; <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/13/668/comments#1755697> ; <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/13/898/>

Officials of BioMed Central and *BMC Public Health* journal, I implore you to conduct a serious investigation into this matter. For my critique of those three papers, please go to Section 5 of the *GraphicEvidence* link.

My bottom line is that the senior University of Sydney scientists' *Australian Paradox* "finding" that there is "an inverse relationship" between sugar consumption and obesity is self-published nonsense. In particular, the documentation of "an inverse relationship" between sugary drink consumption and obesity is clownish.

The obvious problems - small and large - that I have documented in my *GraphicEvidence* link should have been corrected, or the paper should have been retracted. Your investigation should begin with a focus on *why* those problems were not acknowledged let alone corrected in *Australian Paradox Revisited*: <http://www.mdpi.com/2072-6643/3/8/734>

Just a quick scan of Sections 2 and 5 of my *GraphicEvidence* link should convince you that I am not wasting your time. I am confident that my facts are correct. I am confident because this is basic and unambiguous stuff. I am ready to answer any and all of your questions.

If, after a proper investigation, you find that my concerns are well founded - as you will - please throw your considerable weight behind my call for the faulty paper to be corrected or retracted. Conversely, if you think what I have written above is factually incorrect or otherwise unreasonable, please be very critical wherever you find me, including in the comments section here: <http://retractionwatch.wordpress.com/2013/08/22/journal-to-feature-special-issue-on-scientific-misconduct-seeks-submissions/>

Importantly, as noted earlier, some of our media friends (bcc'd) are following this matter closely. If this slowly inflating scandal eventually explodes, it would be good to be able to explain how what you did - given what you now know - was appropriate. (This letter will be uploaded within a few days at <http://www.australianparadox.com/>)

To the extent you found this piece disturbing, please feel free to forward it to colleagues interested in scientific integrity. And spare a thought for Australian taxpayers: widespread and growing concerns about the competence and integrity of the University of Sydney's high-profile pro-sugar obesity research are slowly but surely eroding the credibility of our **new \$500 million Charles Perkins Centre** - a new hub for the study of obesity and related maladies - even before the building is fully operational: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/university-sets-up-500m-centre-for-obesity-research-20130724-2qjq8.html>

Finally, please accept my apology for being long-winded. Like Mark Twain on occasion, I am sorry this is such a long letter, but I did not have the time to write a short one.

Regards,
Rory

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rory robertson
economist and former-fattie

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

Graphic evidence of scientific fraud at the University of Sydney: <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/GraphicEvidence.pdf>

Comments, criticisms, questions, compliments, whatever welcome at strathburnstation@gmail.com

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