

Hi there,

Below is my contribution to a university-based online discussion about Indigenous obesity and improving public health (at <https://theconversation.edu.au/innovative-strategies-needed-to-address-indigenous-obesity-7099>).

I highlight the need for better nutrition information to be made available to everyday people, noting that the University of Sydney's recent high-profile misinformation about the links between sugar consumption, obesity and diabetes has been working in the wrong direction.

In Gary Taubes' fascinating book *Good Calories, Bad Calories*, he discusses a disturbing conflict-of-interest episode a generation ago involving relationships between Harvard University's nutrition department and the US food industry. The lesson is that links between universities and the food industry may not work out well for public health. One warning sign back then was the unusual sight of a famous nutritionist going out of his way to publicly defend "modern sugar consumption" as harmless; one assumes it's even more unusual for famous scientists' arguments exonerating sugar to feature a series of obvious – indeed, eye-popping – errors of fact.

At the bottom of this note, I have added a discussion on "Conflicts of Interest" from the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research*. I believe the current regulations - properly enforced - require much greater transparency from the University of Sydney's low-GI enterprise.

Regards,
Rory
3 July 2012

UNDISCLOSED CONFLICTS OF INTEREST ALONGSIDE SERIOUS ERRORS OF FACT AT UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY'S LOW-GI ENTERPRISE

Thanks for your piece Julie, and congratulations on the work of the Menzies School in this critical area. Actually, I'm just back in Sydney after a week in Cape York, driving back to Cairns via one of the Cape's many remote Aboriginal communities. Coincidentally, thumb-tacked onto the noticeboard outside the (one) community grocery store was a report from the Menzies School featuring a chart showing that sugary products - particularly softdrinks (95% of them full-strength not diet) - had comprised a big part of the store's recent turnover.

It is clear that elevated consumption of sugary foods and drinks is a key driver of Indigenous and other Australians' growing problems with obesity, diabetes and other chronic diet-related diseases. The growing focus on excess added sugar/fructose is a response to the extraordinary amounts we suspect many people are consuming, and the particular damage we now know it does to our bodies, including to our natural appetite controls (http://www.nt.gov.au/health/healthdev/health_promotion/bushbook/volume2/chap3/food.html ; by the way, 258 grams per day translates into 94kg per annum, many multiples of what would be safe/healthy to consume).

In my opinion, minimising the amount of added sugar in our food supply is the obvious low-hanging fruit in any serious battle against obesity and diabetes. Unfortunately, the idea that sucking down heaps of unnecessary sugar is really bad for you - and your kids - is not widely understood in many parts of Australia. Better education - and more heeding of available nutrition advice - hopefully will tend to change that over time, improving today's woeful (if unsurprising) health outcomes.

What is extremely unhelpful in the process of improving health outcomes are false and misleading claims by nutritionists that the consumption of added sugar is unrelated to rising rates of obesity and diabetes. In particular, recent work by high-profile low-GI advocates from the University of Sydney - Professor Jennie Brand-Miller and Dr Alan Barclay - has featured a series of (uncorrected) spectacular false claims seeking to exonerate sugar:

- **Australian sugar consumption has undergone a "substantial decline" over "the past 30 years", so sugar and obesity are unrelated. (This is the high-profile but actually non-existent "Australian Paradox");**
- **Motor vehicles not humans consumed any uptrend in "available" sugar over that period. (Yet ethanol production in Australia does *not* use raw sugar as feedstock!);**
- **Australians' fructose intake today probably is little different from levels enjoyed in pre-European times. (So commercial sugar-cane production and sugary food imports changed little?); and**
- **"There is an absolute consensus that sugar in food does not cause diabetes." (Yet debate rages all around?)**

Each of these claims is false. The facts on these matters are documented at <http://www.australianparadox.com/>, especially in #10 and #11 on the LHS. Also see <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) and <http://www.smh.com.au/business/economist-v-nutritionists-big-sugar-and-lowgi-brigade-lose-20120307-1uj6u.html> .

The University of Sydney crew's repeated claim that "There is an absolute consensus that sugar in food does not cause diabetes" is particularly ridiculous, given an ongoing debate that already has lasted centuries. This debate to an extent remains about whether anything *else* but excessive sugar intake is involved.

After all, "the sugar sickness" - as diabetes reportedly has been known on and off for generations - apparently kept turning up - as the British Empire expanded across the globe - soon after sugar was introduced and became popular in distinct local populations. For those interested in actual facts, this telling history is documented in Chapter 6 of *Good Calories, Bad Calories*.

Given that extraordinary error on the link between elevated sugar consumption and diabetes, it's a bit of a worry that Dr Alan Barclay reportedly "also works for Diabetes Australia (NSW) and sits on the Editorial Board of their (sic) consumer magazine *Conquest* and their (sic) health professional magazine *Diabetes Management Journal*" (<http://daa.asn.au/>).

In any case, the University of Sydney duo's extraordinary sloppiness with key facts on its own chosen "special subject" of sugar introduces the issue of the low-GI industry's serious but undisclosed conflict of interest.

The low-GI industry's fundamental problem is that fructose - the "sweet poison" half of table sugar (the other half is glucose) - has a super-low GI of 19, towards the very bottom of the GI scale.

Fructose is super-low GI so it must be a "good" food, right? And if any processed food product is not low GI, then just add fructose because adding fructose is the recipe for a lower GI reading. Food companies keen to get on board the Low-GI train have an incentive to add fructose, to make processed food "Low GI" (but less healthy in the process).

"How low on the GI scale would you like your manufactured food product, Sir? 54? 53? 41, 40? Tell me when to stop pouring!" Check out the sweet-as low GIs of high-added-fructose "Coca Cola", "Milo", "Snickers Bar", "Ice Cream", "Cake" in a search at <http://www.glycemicindex.com/foodSearch.php> .

For the low-GI industry, the good news is that the most-popular carbohydrate in our food supply - added fructose - also is pretty well the lowest-GI carbohydrate. The bad news is that a growing nucleus of global scientific opinion considers super-low-GI fructose to be the primary driver of the global obesity and diabetes epidemics (<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/17/magazine/mag-17Sugar-t.html?pagewanted=all>).

The likelihood that the low-GI industry would tend to contract or collapse if modern doses of super-low-GI fructose/sugar came to be viewed widely by consumers as a major health hazard represents a serious conflict of interest for the high-profile low-GI industry.

Incentives matter, so it must be noted that the low-GI industry has a **strong incentive** to sound certain that sugar/fructose is not a problem, and to dismiss the idea that modern doses of super-low-GI fructose are a major driver of global obesity, diabetes and other self-inflicted "diseases of affluence".

And the University of Sydney's low-GI advocates certainly have been in the press defending added sugar/fructose against the view that it's a major health hazard:

- <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/health-science/a-spoonful-of-sugar-is-not-so-bad/story-e6frg8y6-1226090126776>
- <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/health-science/war-over-sweet-nothings/story-e6frg8y6-1226261140744>
- <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/weight-a-minute-dont-blame-sugar/story-fn59niix-1226080214264>
- <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/health-science/disgust-at-claims-sugar-as-dangerous-as-alcohol/story-e6frg8y6-1226260002393>
- <http://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/diet-and-fitness/how-hard-can-it-be-to-cut-sugar-20100630-zmvt.html>

So, are those dot points listed on the first page - exonerating sugar/fructose as a health hazard - just a series of clumsy mistakes on basic facts? They could well be - after all, Gary Taubes has documented extraordinary incompetence and sloppiness with key facts by some of the highest-profile and most-influential nutritionists in the US and UK over the past century (for starters, check out Chapters 6 and 23 in *Good Calories, Bad Calories*).

Or are the University of Sydney's high-profile low-GI advocates actually as smart as advertised, and simply doing all they can to breathe life into the fundamentally flawed low-GI approach to nutrition, the approach to which they have devoted their careers? It's hard to know anything much either way until legitimate questions on this conflict-of-interest issue are answered.

In summary, sugar consumption, obesity and diabetes all have increased over the past 30 years. Thus there is no "Australian Paradox", just an idiosyncratic and unreasonable treatment - and avoidance - of the readily available data by those who coined the phrase (see #10 and #11 at <http://www.australianparadox.com/>).

One puzzle in this episode - not yet a paradox! - is why publicly funded scientists are being allowed to continue to mislead the general public on a key cause of obesity and diabetes, by continuing to defend their dodgy paper as unblemished. In my opinion, the deeply flawed *Australian Paradox* paper should be withdrawn by the University of Sydney, and the public record on sugar, obesity and diabetes corrected without further delay.

Importantly, the authors' main excuse so far - that cars not humans have been eating any rising trend in available sugar - is belied by the fact that raw sugar is *not* used as feedstock in ethanol production in Australia. This eye-popping error in response to my critique was an unmistakable confirmation that the paper's fact-checking was negligent and its conclusion hopelessly false. Again, increased "sugar availability" and rising sugary food imports make a mockery of the University of Sydney's repeated claim that (human) sugar consumption has undergone a "substantial decline" over "the past 30 years".

Fighting obesity, diabetes and related maladies - in Aboriginal communities and elsewhere - is the biggest health issue of our time. Accordingly, it's way past time for the ham-fisted University of Sydney low-GI advocates to do the right thing and correct the public record on sugar, obesity and diabetes.

By the way, no-one yet has claimed the \$40,000 up for grabs in my Australian Paradox challenge. Since you no doubt can tell the difference between up and down on a simple chart, why not have a lash? Full details are available at #11 at <http://www.australianparadox.com/>

MORE ON UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY'S UNDISCLOSED CONFLICT OF INTEREST

In summary, the low-GI industry's main conflict of interest boils down to the following:

- (i) It's very important for the prosperity of the low-GI industry that super-low-GI fructose - mixed into tens of thousands of processed food items - remains widely perceived by consumers as safe to eat.**
- (ii) The University of Sydney's low-GI advocates have been very high profile in claiming that low-GI fructose is safe in modern doses.**
- (iii) There is growing evidence that modern doses of fructose are a key driver of obesity and diabetes.**

In my opinion, the general public should know about (i) and (iii) when interpreting (ii).

Just as it turned out to have been a good idea to be sceptical of the tobacco industry's assurances that smoking is not a health hazard, the University of Sydney, the media and everyday Australians looking for reliable dietary advice need to be aware that the low-GI industry has a strong - indeed, existential - interest in communicating the claim that added sugar in modern doses is not a problem.

Given the ubiquity of super-low-GI fructose in today's food supply - "Sugar is not the problem" *must* be the low-GI industry's "party line". Thus the low-GI crew cannot be treated simply as an objective observer in any debate involving sugar/fructose and health issues.

On top of the prestigious jobs enjoyed by its low-GI researchers, the University of Sydney's low-GI enterprise benefits from sizable fees paid by food companies to gain a "Low GI" stamp, which in turn helps them to market and sell sugary food items in particular.

In the US, Gary Taubes has observed that, a generation ago, the head of Harvard University's nutrition department became that nation's "most public defender of sugar", at the same time as his department was enjoying strong levels of funding from "...the sugar industry;...Coca Cola and the National Soft Drink Association" (p.423, *Good Calories, Bad Calories*).

Interestingly, similar enterprises today are citing the University of Sydney duo's deeply flawed *Australian Paradox* paper as

evidence that the Australian Government should not "toughen up" its (draft) nutrition advice against eating added sugar via processed foods and drinks (<http://www.smh.com.au/national/health/research-causes-stir-over-sugars-role-in-obesity-20120330-1w3e5.html>).

My starting-point observation was that it's rather unusual to see serious nutritionists going out of their way to publicly defend added sugar with a passion, and even more unusual for competent scientists' basic arguments to feature eye-popping errors (as listed above).

One assumes there is a simple and benign explanation for all of the above. Would someone "in the know" like to share that explanation with those of us who are wondering what is going on at the University of Sydney?

In the meantime, it would be good if the University of Sydney's low-GI advocates could be upfront about their serious conflict of interest in the public debate about obesity, diabetes and related maladies. Indeed, I believe the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research* requires such transparency, even if that code seems yet to be enforced by the University of Sydney (see pp. 24-25 at <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/files/nhmrc/publications/attachments/r39.pdf>).

The *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research* explains that:

A conflict of interest exists where there is a divergence between the individual interests of a person and their professional responsibilities such that an independent observer might reasonably conclude that the professional actions of that person are unduly influenced by their own interests.

Conflicts of interest in the research area are common and it is important that they are disclosed and dealt with properly. Conflicts of interest have the potential to compromise judgments and decisions that should be made impartially. Such compromise could undermine community trust in research.

Financial conflicts of interest are foremost in the public mind but other conflicts of interest also occur in research, including personal, professional and institutional advantages.

The perception that a conflict of interest exists is also a serious matter and raises concerns about the integrity of individuals or management practices of the institution. (Section 7 in link above)

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rory robertson

[economist and former-fattie](#)

now fairly fructose free! 😊

strathburnstation@gmail.com

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