

HONI SOIT

University of Sydney student newspaper since 1929

O-week, Semester 1, 2014

Sweet research goes sour

http://issuu.com/honi_soit/docs/hs1400_issuu

issuu.com/honi_soit/docs/hs1400_issuu

Sweet research goes sour

Tom Gardner explores the controversy surrounding a Sydney University sugar research project.

The University of Sydney has launched an investigation into a high-profile academic paper published by University nutritionists.

The paper, titled 'The Australian Paradox', contends that sugar has no connection to Australia's obesity crisis, and has been appropriated by the food industry and Australian Beverage Council to fight government regulation. Authors, Professor Jennie Brand-Miller and Dr Alan Barclay, have faced intense criticism of their data and methodology for the past two years.

The report appeared in a 2011 issue of the pay-for-publication journal *Nutrients*. In early 2012, Westpac economist Rory Robertson began to publicly criticise the paper, which he called a "menace to public health".

The main criticism of the research is that it used sugar consumption

statistics extrapolated from an Australian Bureau of Statistics data series that was discontinued due to its unreliability, and that the authors ignored contradictory statistics.

His initial complaint to the university was dismissed by Vice Chancellor Michael Spence, who said that due to the peer-reviewed nature of the research, there was no action the University could or should take in regards to his concerns. But in December 2013, the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research), Professor Jill Trehwella, appointed a scientist to ascertain whether Mr Robertson has a prima facie case.

"I think heads should roll," Mr Robertson told *Honi Soit*, "starting with the removal of the person in charge of overseeing competence and integrity in research, Professor Trehwella."

Although Professor Brand-Miller said her paper has not

been criticised by any scientist, a study by five scientists from the University of Western Australia found the assertions made in The Australian Paradox to be based on incomplete data.

"[There is] a substantially increasing trend in sugar available for consumption in Australia," the group said.

Mr Robertson has offered \$40,000 to anybody who proves that Australian sugar consumption has declined over the past 30 years.

Mr Robertson also alleges that the report is shadowed by undisclosed conflicts of interest. The University earns millions of dollars through its GI Foundation, which certifies sugary products as low-GI. Dr Barclay and a former Coca Cola Australia director are both senior officers of the GI Foundation. Dr Barclay also speaks at Coca Cola Australia seminars.

Earlier this year, Professor Brand-Miller conceded to ABC Radio National that her consumption statistics might have been flawed. Two weeks ago, *Nutrients* published a formal correction of the "inadvertent errors" identified in the radio interview, but maintained that this had "no material impact on the conclusions of our paper".

Professor Brand-Miller is part of the University's \$500 million Charles Perkins Centre for research into diabetes and obesity, which now faces controversy almost before it has opened its doors.

"The Australian Paradox is an extraordinarily shoddy piece of work," said Mr Robertson. "It is unworthy of an influential Charles Perkins Centre scientist."

Professor Brand-Miller and Dr Barclay refused to discuss the matter before the investigation concluded. Professor Trehwella declined to comment.

My update at <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/CPCscientistsresponse.pdf>

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

--

rory robertson

economist and former-fattie

www.strathburn.com

Strathburn Cattle Station is a proud partner of YALARI,

Australia's leading provider of quality boarding-school educations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teenagers. Check it out at <http://www.strathburn.com/yalari.htm>