

UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY EMBRACES BOGUS “NEW” INFORMATION ON SUGAR AND FALSELY DECLARES VICTORY IN AUSTRALIAN PARADOX DISPUTE; ROBERTSON ASKS AGAIN “SCIENTIFIC FRAUD, ANYONE?”

By Rory Robertson (Former fattie)

The Australian Government’s [national nutrition guidelines](#) are redrafted about once every decade, and the next version is due to be finalised and published “in early 2013”.

Those at the University of Sydney keen to keep official advice against added sugar “soft” have been busy in the past couple of years, so too the sugar industry itself more recently (<http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/New-nonsense-based-sugarreport.pdf>).

Those who think public health in Australia would benefit from tougher official advice against added sugar – let’s call them “anti sugar” groups - have been kept busy by the recent efforts of the “pro sugar” groups.

1. UPDATE ON THE AUSTRALIAN PARADOX DISPUTE

(i) High-profile University of Sydney nutritionists and food-industry service providers Professor Jennie Brand-Miller and Mr Bill Shrapnel have argued strongly in recent years that added sugar is not a health hazard, so the Australian Government’s **national nutrition guidelines** should **not** toughen official advice against foods with added sugar (<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/health-science/a-spoonful-of-sugar-is-not-so-bad/story-e6frg8y6-1226090126776>).

(ii) The scientific reality is somewhat different, so the new nutrition guidelines may well toughen official advice against sugar - shifting from eat/drink “only moderate amounts” of added sugar to “**limit**” the intake of added sugar - in response to growing evidence that today’s unnaturally elevated consumption of added sugar - the “**fructose**” half - is indeed a health hazard (<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/17/magazine/mag-17Sugar-t.html?pagewanted=all>).

(iii) Spearheading the University of Sydney’s and the food-industry’s campaigns for official advice against sugar to “stay soft” has been the **discredited Australian Paradox paper** and its clearly false - but twice “peer reviewed” - scientific observation of “**an inverse relationship**” between sugar consumption and obesity. That is, eat more sugar and get leaner. Yeah, right. (<http://www.smh.com.au/national/health/research-causes-stir-over-sugars-role-in-obesity-20120330-1w3e5.html>)

(iv) Extraordinarily for a twice “peer reviewed” published paper, *Australian Paradox* - is dominated by **serious errors**: (a) the invalid reliance on a Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) sugar series, the ABS basis of which (4306.0) was discontinued as unreliable after 1998-99, a decade before the paper was published!; and (b) the authors somehow managed to overlook **upward** trends in **four** other indicators of sugar consumption in their own published charts! (Slides 8-10 and 17 at <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/AUSTRALIAN-PARADOX-101-SLIDESHOW.pdf>).

(v) The University of Sydney refuses to face these disturbing facts. Indeed, via its authors (Dr Barclay and Professor Brand-Miller), its Deputy Vice Chancellor, Research (Professor Jill Trehwella) and its Vice-Chancellor (Dr Michael Spence), it has mounted a **disingenuous** – “**It’s peer-reviewed and published, so get lost**” defence of *Australian Paradox*’s bogus conclusion (<http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/Sept2012-Conversations.pdf>).

(vi) Few well-informed observers take the University’s lame defence seriously given the eye-popping errors above, and also given the University’s **still-undisclosed serious conflict of interest** in arguing that super-low-GI (19) added fructose – the “sweet poison” half of sugar - is not a health hazard, while also operating a low-GI-food-stamping business that depends on the general public continuing to see super-low-GI fructose/sugar as benign. **The trouble with this undisclosed conflict of interest, of course, is that it is hard for outsiders to know where the line is drawn between the interests of science and the interests of the scientists’ business.** Doesn’t the **Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research** require disclosure of serious conflicts of interest? (See p. 3 in the link above, Slide 50 in my Slideshow; and Section 7 at <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/files/nhmrc/publications/attachments/r39.pdf>).

(vii) With the *Australian Paradox* paper(s) now thoroughly discredited – and so the campaign to stop Canberra toughening its official nutrition advice against sugar stalled - the sugar industry recently responded with a new report – produced by Green Pool Commodity Specialists – to retrieve the situation. Or perhaps it’s just interested in nutrition research in general, starting now. In any case, the sugar industry’s report is devoid of credibility because its “new” information simply is the **same discredited sugar series that was discontinued as unreliable a decade ago** (ABS 4306.0), updated using the **same broken methodology abandoned as unreliable!** (<http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/New-nonsense-based-sugarreport.pdf>).

(viii) Unconstrained by the usual desire to maintain intellectual credibility, **Mr Bill Shrapnel, the Deputy Chairman of the University of Sydney’s Nutrition Research Foundation**, recently claimed – with a straight face, maybe seriously but still erroneously – that “**the publication of a new report has vindicated the [Australian Paradox] researchers**”. Ironically, that Foundation exists in part “to reliably inform the public about nutrition”. Sorry Mr Shrapnel, but your self-serving story that the sugar industry’s bogus “new” data series wipes clean the serious factual errors driving the discredited *Australian Paradox* conclusion just won’t fly (Section 2).

Summary: If professional scientists want to claim an important scientific observation – The Australian Paradox: “an inverse relationship” between sugar consumption (down) and obesity (up) - based on a single FAO sugar series, and contrary to the strong competing evidence – is it not **somewhat negligent, incompetent, reckless and/or fraudulent** of them not to have

noticed – or deliberately not acknowledged? - that the ABS basis of that critical FAO series was discontinued as unreliable by the ABS a decade before the now-discredited *Australian Paradox* paper was published, a decade before that paper's bogus conclusion was used to spearhead the University of Sydney's and the food industry's campaigns for the official nutrition guidelines to "stay soft" on sugar? One hopes Canberra has seen through those ham-fisted campaigns.

2. "RIGHT OF REPLY" DOESN'T SUIT BILL SHRAPNEL

Mr Bill Shrapnel is the Deputy Chairman of the University of Sydney's Nutrition Research Foundation, presumably acting as a link between the University and the food industry (http://sydney.edu.au/science/molecular_bioscience/nrf/council_members.php and http://scepticalnutritionist.com.au/?page_id=2).

On 8 October 2012, Mr Shrapnel posted an amusingly self-serving assessment of the latest development in the growing academic and public-health scandal involving the University's faulty *Australian Paradox* papers. Mr Shrapnel embraced the bogus "new" sugar series in the sugar industry's nonsense-based Green Pool report and claimed "The Australian Paradox is confirmed: sugar intakes are falling", declaring victory for the University of Sydney in the *Great Australian Paradox* Dispute of 2012

(<http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/New-nonsense-based-sugarreport.pdf>).

Mr Shrapnel's contradictory piece could easily have been subtitled: "Rory Robertson is a crank who does not know what he is talking about, so he should **stop criticising the obvious errors** behind the University of Sydney's factually incorrect-but-twice-peer-reviewed and published pro-sugar *Australian Paradox* conclusion (<http://scepticalnutritionist.com.au/?p=514>).

I've written "self-serving" because all that was missing from Bill's blog was that nice photo of him standing around the table with Professor Brand-Miller – one of the authors of *Australian Paradox* – and all that tasty sugary food (<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/health-science/a-spoonful-of-sugar-is-not-so-bad/story-e6frg8y6-1226090126776>). **There's a larger selection of the University of Sydney's "healthy" low-GI-stamped sugary food products and drinks** at p.10-11 at <http://www.gisymbol.com/cmsAdmin/uploads/Glycemic-Index-Foundation-Healthy-Choices-Brochure.pdf>).

My initial written response to Mr Shrapnel's blog – reproduced below, after "**Your comment is awaiting moderation**" - was submitted to "**The Sceptical Nutritionist**" website on 10 October 2012. A friend assessed the probability of Bill actually allowing my response to be posted on his website as "zero". I figured maybe 50/50.

Oops! Yes, my mate was right that Bill Shrapnel would **simply refuse** to run my response in the comments section under his piece. **Yes, I understand that there's no natural place for me on "The Sceptical Nutritionist" website if I'm highlighting**

Bill's mistaken, self-serving and notably non-sceptical embrace of the sugar industry's bogus "new" information.

Needless to say, I do not regard Mr Shrapnel as an objective observer in this matter; even his claim to be a "sceptical" nutritionist seems a stretch. If he were either, his first criticism of the now-discredited *Australian Paradox* paper would not have arrived some 18 months after it was finalised just across the halls, and more than six months after I had brought the serious errors to his attention. A sceptical nutritionist would have looked at the facts and straight away agreed with my observation that the emperor has no clothes.

Awkwardly, Bill Shrapnel belatedly has acknowledged a **large hole** in the discredited *Australian Paradox* paper: "...a major source of the data on sugar consumption was 'apparent consumption' data, which had ceased to be collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) after 1998/9. **So, any suggestion that sugar consumption had continued to fall from 2000 could not be supported**" (my bolding).

Yes, Bill, that's one of the critical points I've been highlighting for months, a serious error your colleagues have failed to address: <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/8-QUESTIONS-FOR-AWB-&-JBM-BANNED.pdf> .

In fact, Bill, that key "apparent consumption" series (4306.0) was discontinued as unreliable after 1998-99. And it's the **only one** of the authors' **five** big-picture sugar indicators that pointed down; the **four** other indicators show **upward** trends (Slides 12-20 in <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/AUSTRALIAN-PARADOX-101-SLIDESHOW.pdf>).

So the University of Sydney's supposedly twice-peer-reviewed claim that the range of information assembled in its faulty *Australian Paradox* papers "...indicates a consistent and substantial decline in total refined or added sugar consumption by Australians over the past 30 years" **clearly is factually incorrect and should be corrected.**

Keen not to put two and two together, Mr Shrapnel partly noted the dominating error - the critical dataset having been discontinued as unreliable by the ABS a decade before *Australian Paradox* was published! – but then moved on quickly as if this were some trivial oversight, something forgivable like spelling Robertson as "Roberston" - as the authors did - in a formal scientific journal article.

Despite the critical ABS sugar series not existing for more than one-third of the relevant 1980 to 2010 timeframe - and that fact hidden from or at least not revealed to *Australian Paradox* readers or any independent reviewers – Mr Bill Shrapnel did not break stride. HELLO! Bill, the key dataset wholly relied upon for the (bogus) conclusion was **discontinued as unreliable! Moreover, it **does not exist** for more than one-third of the period over which "a consistent and substantial decline" is claimed. The **four** other sugar indicators in the authors' own charts all trend **up** not down!**

Instead of fussing about his University of Sydney colleagues' **persistent negligence or possibly deliberate deception of readers and any peer-review process**, Mr Shrapnel moved on quickly to do the only thing he was keen to do: embrace the sugar industry's new nonsense-based report, put on a straight face and claim "**vindication**" for his negligent colleagues, and **victory** for the University of Sydney in the *Great Australian Paradox* Dispute of 2012.

Nice one, Bill. It's so crazy it might just have worked. Unfortunately, not everyone can pull off the difficult task of having one foot in the food industry and one foot in a serious University, and somehow maintain credibility in both camps. And while it's good to support one's underperforming colleagues (Slide 6 in Slideshow link) after they have made serious errors that should be corrected, it's a pity to go so far as to kiss good-bye to intellectual credibility in the process.

In any case, the next section carries my comments (with minor fine-tuning) that Bill refused to post on his website. Of course, it's a free country and I'm not complaining - after all, I have my own website. It's just interesting that Bill was not prepared to run a response from the guy he'd just (wrongly) criticised.

3. RR's UNPUBLISHED COMMENT

[Rory Robertson \(former Fattie\)](#)

Your comment is awaiting moderation (No longer!)

Thanks Bill, for your kind introduction. Readers, my name is Rory Robertson. I am the economist responsible for the "Australian Paradox" website and critique to which Bill refers.

Bill presents me as a crank, or someone who's "interests were under threat". In fact, my only interest in this matter is as a taxpayer who thinks that publicly funded academic/scientific research should be fact-based, and that serious errors introduced into important public debates - in this case, on obesity and diabetes, together the biggest public-health issue of our time - should be corrected as quickly as possible.

*My efforts in setting up a website documenting the "Australian Paradox" dispute came only after the authors and the journal had failed to properly address - indeed, to address at all - the basic but dominating errors made in concluding "...a consistent and substantial decline in total refined or added sugar consumption by Australians over the past 30 years", on the way to what I consider to be the bogus scientific observation of "an inverse relationship" between sugar consumption and obesity. **To this day, the authors have not provided a credible explanation - there is no good defence available - for the serious errors I have identified in my Slides 9, 10 and 17 at <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/AUSTRALIAN-PARADOX-101-SLIDESHOW.pdf>.***

Bill, I'm amused but not surprised that you have embraced the sugar industry's "new" data series on sugar consumption

as fresh information that "...has vindicated the [Australian Paradox] researchers".

*Claiming to be "The Sceptical Nutritionist", Bill, you should have asked **the obvious question**, something like: "How did a modest Brisbane firm succeed in the extraordinarily difficult task of counting all the added sugar scattered here, there and everywhere across our food supply, a task so immense that even the Australian Bureau of Statistics failed badly, so badly in fact that it had to abandon its methodology as unreliable over a decade ago"?*

*I'm guessing that you will not be surprised to find that my reading of the new sugar-industry report - and what it means for the Australian Paradox dispute - is rather different from your (mistaken) assessment. **Indeed, I have written: "...the report is based on a sugar series [4306.0] that was discontinued as unreliable by the ABS a decade ago, and updated using a broken methodology abandoned as unreliable by the ABS a decade ago... accordingly, the report is worse than useless, a nonsense that misleads rather than informs the public debate"***

(<http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/New-nonsense-based-sugarreport.pdf>).

*Bill, did you also notice that the new report's unconvincing discussion on "**The Role of Fructose**" seems completely unaware that cane sugar – sucrose – is in fact one-half fructose? [Discussed in Section 7 in the piece linked above.]*

*[Next, in my naive expectation of being "published", I refer briefly to a contribution by someone (Fiona) whose online comment was not banned!] **By the way, Fiona, that's a very interesting issue. The measurement difficulties involved here are daunting. The ABS struggled to know how much sugar was in the tens of thousands of varieties of imported food and drink products. On [pages 4-5] in the previous link, I highlight an example involving annual imports worth \$700m by one firm involved with sugary softdrinks and other beverages.***

Bill, I don't like to leave things poorly, but you have rather contradicted yourself above in stating: (i) "...the publication of a new report has vindicated the researchers"; alongside (ii) "...any suggestion that sugar consumption had continued to fall from 2000 could not be supported".

So which is it Bill? It's one, or the other. It cannot be both. Are the authors of Australian Paradox (i) "vindicated"; or (ii) was the claim of "...a consistent and substantial decline in total refined or added sugar consumption by Australians over the past 30 years" in fact contradicted by the available data, given that **four** sugar indicators in the authors' own charts trend **up** (Slides 12-15 in my Slideshow link above), while their chosen conclusion of down was based on an ABS series already **discontinued as unreliable** for over a decade before the paper was published? (Slide 10)

4. KEY QUESTIONS: SCIENTIFIC FRAUD, ANYONE? WILL OFFICIAL NUTRITION ADVICE GET TOUGHER ON SUGAR?

For many observers, the claim of a “substantial decline” in sugar consumption “over the past 30 years” was always a bit of a joke. After all, many of us born before 1970 have access to the useful reality-check of remembering what the insides of our grocery stores, service stations and cafes/convenience stores looked like circa 1980, before they were filled with today's extraordinary variety of local and imported foods and drinks infused with heaps of added sugar/fructose. If sugar consumption really has declined “over the past 30 years”, it's a wonder the shelves in food stores today are so well stocked with almost endless varieties of sugary products. It wasn't always thus. Is everyone today really “just looking”?

Those claiming – seriously - that sugar-industry consultant Green Pool's new “update” on sugar consumption provides credible support for the “scientific observation” from *Australian Paradox* that sugar consumption trended lower over the 30 years to 2010 reveal a fundamental lack of understanding of the **particularly difficult data-collection issues** involved in counting (added) sugar.

For example, **Green Pool mistakenly claims** that no-one in Canberra these days is measuring anything nutritional: “The fact that no Australian government agency currently collates and publishes apparent consumption data for products including sugar is regrettable” (p. 3 of 22). In fact, data-collection agencies in Canberra still publish apparent consumption data for easier-to-measure food and drink products, including **beef, lamb, pork, chicken, butter, milk, cheese, beer and wine, but not for much-harder-to-measure refined sugar** (p. 1 at <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/New-nonsense-based-sugarreport.pdf>).

Returning to Mr Bill Shrapnel's hopeful but **actually false and embarrassing declaration of victory for the University of Sydney in the *Australian Paradox* dispute** and his punchy but-mistaken criticism of my efforts along the way, it's worth noting that it was in response to the *Australian Paradox* authors' **unreasonable and unscholarly behaviour in the rebuttal process** that I began using words like “incompetence”, “shonky”, “retraction”, as well as “unscholarly” and “misconduct” (<http://scepticalnutritionist.com.au/?p=514>).

Let's recap some of the notable steps along the way by these senior representatives of a distinguished Group of Eight University, an entity funded by Australian taxpayers. In their initial fluffy rebuttal of my critique, the University of Sydney scientists' main specific response was to claim that **cars not humans have been consuming a big chunk – up to 14kg p.a. per person - of the available sugar via fast-growing ethanol production** (Slides 32 and 38 in <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/AUSTRALIAN-PARADOX-101-SLIDESHOW.pdf>).

That would have been a fine argument but for the slight problem that sugar is not used in ethanol production in Australia (Slide 39). That's awkward. Bad guess. Wrong again. Instead of conceding that the available defence for *Australian Paradox* is not strong, our underperforming scientists chose to proceed via an unscholarly unacknowledged delete and a rush to publish a second “peer reviewed” formal scientific paper that collapses under simple scrutiny - *Australian Paradox Revisited*.

Widely respected journalist **Michael Pascoe** (Slides 40 and 41) recently skewered the scientists by documenting the role of their slippery disappearing false made-up excuse on the way to a fluffy and utterly unconvincing rebuttal of my critique, a response that **unreasonably chose to avoid addressing the serious errors I had highlighted** (Slides 8-10 and 36). Yet somehow the same bogus conclusions simply were restated, independently peer-reviewed and published again in *Nutrients*, no problem. How does that work?

Readers, the authors' silly false made-up claim in response to my critique - that cars not humans were eating a chunk of the available sugar via ethanol production - is unmistakable confirmation that the University of Sydney's “study” is lightweight and sloppy with important facts, or perhaps worse – simply making them up as required.

Readers, how is it that **professional scientists** from the prestigious University of Sydney suddenly are in the business of **clumsily grasping at non-existent straws to defend a faulty “peer reviewed” paper** - containing the bogus scientific observation of “an inverse relationship” between sugar consumption and obesity - published in a journal where the lead author happens to be the Guest Editor?

So, yes, as Bill Shrapnel correctly noted, I also have used the following words and phrases to describe the quality of the deeply flawed published papers, prompted by the unscholarly conduct of the authors: “hopeless, negligent, sloppy, a disgrace, ... reckless, factually incorrect, idiosyncratic, a major embarrassment, hopelessly wrong, spectacularly false, and a threat to Australian public health” (<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/17/magazine/mag-17Sugar-t.html?pagewanted=all>).

And, yes, as Bill again correctly noted, I did describe the quality-control process at the little-respected pay-as-you-publish E-journal *Nutrients* – which in the publication of *Australian Paradox* operated with the lead author as its “Guest Editor” – as “hopelessly broken”, with the large Editorial Board apparently “incompetent”, “underperforming” and/or perhaps “asleep at the wheel”.

Yes, I did use all those words, after carefully fitting them to the facts as they emerged. More recently, I have highlighted the possibility of “scientific fraud”, given that factually incorrect and misleading information was published in *Australian Paradox*, and then the same bogus conclusions simply were restated without revision in the authors' quickly published response to my critique.

Why is the University of Sydney's senior management now claiming falsely that *Nutrients'* quality-control process involved "**internationally accepted standard practice**", when it must know that the lead author and the Guest Editor of the publishing journal are the same person? (<http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/Sept2012-Conversations.pdf>)

In *Australian Paradox Revisited* – the formally published and supposedly peer-reviewed response to my critique - **there was no acknowledgement or correction by the authors of the serious errors I had highlighted, errors so obvious that even Mr Shrapnel now can see at least one of them**, even if he failed to notice – or at least failed to note - its significance in the dispute.

In *Australian Paradox Revisited*, the authors claimed – again falsely – that “there are factual errors in Mr. Robertson’s essay and misinterpretation of the distinctions between total sugars vs. refined sugars [as in my Slides 17 and 18?], sugar availability vs. apparent consumption [because cars not humans are still eating the sugar, as in my Slides 19-20 and 38-39?], sugar-sweetened and diet soft drinks [as in my Slide 9?], and other [unspecified] nutrition information (p.1). Actually, the fact that the authors also managing to mis-spell my name as “Roberston” fuelled doubts as to whether *Nutrients'* much-cited “peer review” process stretched as far as **engaging “spell-check”** (bottom of p. 2 in <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/nutrients-03-00491-s003.pdf>).

Importantly, it's not just me, Bill Shrapnel and Michael Pascoe who have noted obvious errors in the now-thoroughly discredited *Australian Paradox* papers. The observation of "...a consistent and substantial decline in total refined or added sugar consumption by Australians over the past 30 years" also has **been dismissed as factually incorrect by Dr Rosemary Stanton, Professor Boyd Swinburn and Professor Robert Lustig, as well as high-profile Australian government nutritionist Mr Chris Forbes-Ewan, amongst others** (see Slides 22-30).

Nor am I the only one who wonders whether **scientific fraud** may have been involved in the process of publishing the bogus scientific conclusion – “an inverse relationship” between (added) sugar consumption and obesity – not once but twice, in the “peer reviewed” *Australian Paradox* paper in 2011 and then again in *Australian Paradox Revisited* in 2012 (Slides 8-10 and 31-44).

According to the **Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research**, "A complaint or allegation relates to research misconduct if it involves all of the following:

- an alleged breach of this Code
- **intent and deliberation, recklessness or gross and persistent negligence** [*Australian Paradox Revisited*, verified as flawless!]
- **serious consequences, such as false information on the public record**, or adverse effects on research participants, animals or the environment.

Research misconduct includes fabrication, falsification, plagiarism or deception in proposing, carrying out or reporting the results of research, and failure to declare or manage a serious conflict of interest. ..." (My emphasis; Sections 9 and 10 at <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/files/nhmrc/publications/attachments/r39.pdf>).

Are we there yet? Readers, please tell me - based on the unusually well-documented facts of this matter - why this whole episode isn't an example of “persistent negligence” (or worse) and a “failure to declare or manage a serious conflict of interest” leading to “serious consequences, such as false information on the public record” and so morphing into “Research misconduct”? (Slides 41-50)

In any case, let's hope Canberra's soon-to-be-refreshed **national nutrition guidelines** take a tougher stance against sugar – with the revised advice to “limit” added sugar (better still “minimise” or “eliminate”) toughened from today's consume “only moderate amounts” - despite the “stay soft” push by the University of Sydney and the food-industry entities that embraced the bogus *Australian Paradox* paper (<http://www.smh.com.au/national/health/research-causes-stir-over-sugars-role-in-obesity-20120330-1w3e5.html>).

Readers, please be very critical of my analysis publicly if you think what I have written above or elsewhere is factually incorrect or unreasonable. (I think not.) Otherwise, perhaps forward this piece to any colleagues, friends or family who may find it interesting.

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rory robertson

[economist and former-fattie](#)

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strathburnstation@gmail.com

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