

Quick quiz on research integrity: What if Sydney Uni spent \$500 million on the Charles Perkins Centre but not five minutes on research integrity?

By Rory Robertson, Sunday 17 November 2013

Good evening, morning, afternoon,

In the past month or so, I have written to hundreds of scientists at BioMed Central - <http://www.biomedcentral.com/about/trustees> - and the Academic Board of the University of Sydney - <http://sydney.edu.au/ab/about/members.shtml> - to request official investigations into the origins, quality and influence of the extraordinarily faulty *Australian Paradox* paper.

Here are the letters: <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/LetterBioMedCentral.pdf> ; <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/Letter-UoS-Academic-Board.pdf>

The following quiz is an attempt to provide investigators and observers with a better understanding of the detail of my concerns about the lack of competent quality control that has promoted reckless misinformation in the public debate - including in Federal Parliament - on the origins of obesity and type 2 diabetes, together the greatest public-health challenge of our times: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/health/research-causes-stir-over-sugars-role-in-obesity-20120330-1w3e5.html> ; <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/Uni&SugarAustraliaPRsugar.pdf> ; http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlinfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/9526da6b-9674-4509-a6d5-a7115a7c1f1a/0338/hansard_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf

For those interested, good luck with the quiz.

Best wishes,
Rory

SIX OF THE BEST

Question 1: What if there were no competent quality control on scientific output when it mattered at the University of Sydney's new \$500 million Charles Perkins Centre (CPC) for the study of obesity, diabetes and related maladies? <http://www.smh.com.au/national/university-sets-up-500m-centre-for-obesity-research-20130724-2qjq8.html>

Correct answer: Oops. We will fix the problem immediately.

University of Sydney's answer:

"Dear Mr Robertson

I have received your e-mail of 24 May [2012].

On the advice available to me the report of Professor Brand-Miller's research which appears in *Nutrients* was independently and objectively peer-reviewed prior to its publication in that reputable journal.

In that circumstance there is no further action which the University can or should take in relation to your concerns.

Yours sincerely

Michael Spence

DR MICHAEL SPENCE | Vice-Chancellor and Principal UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY: Chart 6 at <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/22Slideshowaustraliangoestoparadoxcanberrafinal.pdf>

Readers, the extraordinarily faulty *Australian Paradox* paper is the highest-profile "peer-reviewed" research ever self-published by the Charles Perkins Centre's highest-profile health scientists. Here is a copy of the faulty paper: <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/OriginalAustralianParadoxPaper.pdf> (scroll down http://www.mdpi.com/journal/nutrients/special_issues/carbohydrates)

Question 2: "The prevalence of obesity has increased 3 fold in Australians since 1980" (p. 491). What is a "3 fold" increase expressed in percentage terms?

CPC answer: "300%" (p. 502).

Correct answer: 200%.

Question 3: "Overall, there was a decrease in sugar contribution from nutritively [sugar] sweetened carbonated soft drinks to the Australian food supply, amounting to 12,402 tons (~600 g per person per year, Figure 6) from 2002 to 2006" (p. 498). Readers, what is ~12,000 tons of sugar divided by four years divided by ~20 million people? Show your workings.

CPC answer: "~600 g per person per year".

Correct answer: ~150 g per person per year. Workings: 12,400 tonnes is 12,400,000,000 grams. Divided by four is ~3,000,000,000 grams. Then divide by ~20,000,000 people. Cancelling seven zeros on each side, we have 300/2 grams = 150 g per person per year.

Question 4: Sales of sugary softdrinks rose from 35L per person in 1994 to 45L in 2006 (see Chart 5A, p. 498). Is that an increase or a decrease in sales? For example, is it a 30% increase or a 10% decrease?

CPC answer: "Food industry data indicate that per capita sales of low calorie (non-nutritively sweetened) [water and/or diet] beverages doubled from 1994 to 2006 [correct: rising from 15L to 30L] while nutritively [sugar] sweetened beverages decreased by 10% [from 35L to 45 L per year - huh?]" (p. 500, paragraph 3).

Correct answer: 30% increase. So sugary softdrink sales increased. Obesity increased. What paradox?

It turns out that the "paradox" finding resulted from an extraordinary misreading of a simple chart. Oops. In fact, in the real world - given the earlier upward trend in per-capita sugary drink sales from 1980 to 1994 - there is no evidence of "a consistent and substantial decline" in Australian per-capita sugar consumption via sugary softdrinks in the relevant 1980 to 2010 time-frame. As most observers notice immediately, the *Australian Paradox* paper is an extraordinarily faulty piece of work. That it was self-published in a formal journal - by the lead author operating as the "Guest Editor" of the publishing journal - is an academic disgrace, in my opinion (see pp. 10-11 in the next link).

Question 5: Comparing Figure 6 with Figure 6a in <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/GraphicEvidence.pdf> , is 150g per person per year "substantial" or trivial in the general scheme of things? For a bonus point: Does Figure 6 show (a) clear evidence of "a consistent and substantial decline" in per capita sugar consumption over the relevant 1980 to 2010 timeframe; or (b) less than a decade's worth of dodgy data, poorly analysed?

CPC answer: Substantial. For a bonus point: (a).

Correct answer: Trivial, even if one assumes the data are valid. For a bonus point: (b).

Question 6: Readers, evidence for a "consistent and substantial decline" in something - anything - typically requires the available data to trend down not up. Am I right? In Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 4a and 5 in the *GraphicEvidence* link above, do the authors' chosen and preferred *Australian Paradox* datasets trend up or down over the relevant 1980 to 2010 timeframe? (pp. 4-6)

Correct answers: Yes. Up. One wonders how this nonsense was ever published in a formal journal. On that, see #xx on p. 20 of my *GraphicEvidence* link.

CPC answer: "This analysis of apparent consumption, national dietary surveys and food industry data indicates a consistent and substantial decline in total refined or added sugar consumption by Australians over the past 30 years" (bottom of p.499). Huh?

SIX MORE - FOR BONUS POINTS

Readers, Professor Jennie Brand-Miller and Dr Alan Barclay have a website devoted to pretending that their extraordinarily faulty *Australian Paradox* paper is flawless: <http://www.glycemicindex.com/> (pointing to <http://www.theaustralianparadox.com.au/>)

Awkwardly, that website features the "independent" Green Pool sugar series, a series commissioned, funded and "framed" by the sugar industry in 2012 in an attempt to rescue its underperforming University of Sydney business partners.

Yes, the University of Sydney and the sugar industry are business partners: that is, the University's GI business above exists in part to charge the sugary food/drink industries up to \$6,000 a pop for stamping particular brands of sugar and sugary products as Healthy: (scroll down) <http://www.gisymbol.com/products-2/>; Sustagen Sport Chocolate is 57% sugar (yum) <http://www.gisymbol.com.au/cmsAdmin/uploads/Glycemic-Index-Foundation-Healthy-Choices-Brochure.pdf>

Here is a chart of the sugar industry's Green Pool series: <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/JBM-AWB-AustralianParadox.pdf>

Here is Professor Jennie Brand-Miller and Dr Alan Barclay's GI business explicitly partnered with the sugar industry: <http://www.logicane.com/Partners>

Question 7: Is it reasonable for Professor Jennie Brand-Miller and Dr Alan Barclay to pretend via a University of Sydney website that the sugar industry's invented Green Pool sugar series - which trends flat/up over the quarter-century to 2010 - supports the *Australian Paradox* claim of "a consistent and substantial decline" over the period 1980-2010? For a bonus point: Is the sugary industry's "shonky sugar series" somehow "independent" in the debate about whether or not sugar is a menace to public health?

Correct answer: No. For a bonus point: No.

CPC's answer: *[To be clear, this answer was made up by RDR weaving together various relevant facts.]* We would prefer not to discuss the University's partnership with the sugar and sugary products industries. Yes, it will be difficult to operate the \$500m Charles Perkins Centre research hub for studies into obesity, diabetes and related maladies - with taxpayers funding close to 1000 researchers, support staff and research to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars per annum - while also enjoying our business relationship with the sugar and sugary food/drink industries. To our credit, we have no similar financial relationship with the tobacco industry.

Fortunately, our highest-profile obesity and diabetes experts have sold over three million pop-sci diet books promoting the story that "There is absolute consensus that sugar in food does not cause [type 2] diabetes: <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/diabetes.pdf>

Awkwardly, our CPC experts' claim of "absolute consensus" is ridiculed by the wide acceptance by scientists and medical practitioners of the view that sugar is a key driver of type 2 diabetes: <http://care.diabetesjournals.org/content/33/11/2477.full.pdf>

Indeed, a recent survey by Credit Suisse found that something like 90% of medical doctors globally think added sugar is a key driver of both obesity and type 2 diabetes: pp. 14-15 in <https://publications.credit-suisse.com/tasks/render/file/index.cfm?fileid=780BF4A8-B3D1-13A0-D2514E21EFFB0479>

Our experts may not know what they are talking about with regards to added sugar, obesity and type 2 diabetes but they are good for the CPC brand because their pro-sugar nonsense remains high-profile in the public debate: ("10 times"?!) <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2013/s3868327.htm>; (more like) http://assets.coca-colacompany.com/ba/22/39fae0564dcda20c694be368b8cf/TCCC_2010_Annual_Review_Per_Capita_Consumption.pdf

Question 8: Readers, one of the rarest things in nature – and thus pretty well non-existent in genuine 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. So when CPC scientists discover a dead-flat straight line in one of their own self-

published charts - Figures 9 and 10 in my *GraphicEvidence* link - should they investigate the extent to which the data have been falsified, or simply declare a "paradox" and pretend everything is fine, especially if it's a pro-sugar, GI-business-supportive result?

CPC answer: Simply declare an "Australian Paradox" and pretend everything is fine.

Correct answer: Write to the data provider and then assess the extent to which the **conspicuously flat-lining data were falsified**. Discuss the problem that falsified flat-lining data are not usually embraced as fact in "peer reviewed" research: <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/FAOfalsifiedsugar.pdf>

Question 9: Is it reasonable for a competent member of the public to document the problems with an extraordinarily faulty piece of self-published yet "peer reviewed" research - highlighting its simple arithmetic errors, falsified data and mistaken interpretations of up versus down - and then make a fuss that its authors – influential CPC scientists with strong links to the sugar and sugary food industries - are seeking to (falsely) exonerate sugar including sugary softdrinks as a menace to public health?

CPC answer: "Professor Brand-Miller says Mr Robertson is not a nutritionist and does not understand nutrition": <http://www.smh.com.au/national/health/research-causes-stir-over-sugars-role-in-obesity-20120330-1w3e5.html#ixzz2kbbFvp94>

Correct answer: Yes. In particular, note that the final sentence in *Australian Paradox's* "Conclusions" reads: "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" (p. 502). Clearly, it is the CPC's food/drink experts who refuse to face simple facts on the links between sugar, sugary softdrinks and public health: <http://www.rethinksugarydrink.org.au/facts>

Question 10: After influential but overconfident CPC scientists - three million popsci-diet books sold - had self-published an extraordinarily faulty paper and it had become both an academic disgrace and a menace to public health, should they have taken the approach of simply saying or doing whatever suited to pretend that their faulty paper is flawless?

Correct answer: No.

CPC answer: Mr Robertson's critique is wrong in part because in the late 2000s cars not humans were consuming a big chunk of the available sugar via ethanol production: <http://www.smh.com.au/business/pesky-economist-wont-let-big-sugar-lie-20120725-22pru.html> ; (p. 2) <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/RESPONSE-TO-ROBERTSON.pdf>

Question 11: Incompetent scientific papers litter the scientific record. In general, that has little to do with scientific fraud. Mostly, it is just incompetence facilitated by a lack of competent quality control. But what if influential authors of an extraordinarily faulty paper - after having been advised multiple times that their high-profile paper is dominated by basic arithmetic errors, falsified data and confusion about up versus down – recklessly ignore a correct critique and choose instead to keep publishing responses in formal journals pretending that their notoriously faulty paper is flawless. Isn't that basic fraud?

Correct answer: It appears to be. After all, fraud simply is "intentional deception made for personal gain or to damage another individual" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fraud>). The University of Sydney's high-profile scientists are well aware that their paper is faulty and yet time and time again they continue to claim that it is flawless; clearly, they have sought to bolster their credibility and careers at the expense of mine:

<http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/nutrients-03-00491-s003.pdf> ; <http://www.theaustralianparadox.com.au/>

CPC answer: (September 2013) "The Australian Paradox has not been refuted": <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/13/898> And yet: <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/GraphicEvidence.pdf>

Question 12: When a competent member of the public advises the University of Sydney's senior management of research misconduct involving an extraordinarily faulty yet high-profile paper self-published and defended by two of the University's undersupervised scientists, should it: (a) undertake a formal investigation into the veracity of its scientists' self-published work; or (b) pretend there is no problem and hope the problem goes away?

For a bonus point: Is it a problem that the CPC's highest-profile obesity and diabetes researchers - one of whom also is Head of Research at the Australian Diabetes Council - have sparked something of a bull market in shonky pro-sugar science that is a growing menace to Australian public health?

<http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/Uni&SugarAustraliaPRsugar.pdf> ; (fourth final paragraph)

http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/07/25/obesity-comes-to-australia/?_r=0

Correct answer: (a) Conduct a proper investigation. And for that bonus point: Yes.

In my opinion, Professor Jennie Brand-Miller and Dr Alan Barclay's notorious *Australian Paradox* paper is both an academic disgrace and a menace to public health. It should be corrected or retracted. A formal investigation of the unsettling *Australian Paradox* episode should be undertaken by both the University of Sydney's Academic Board and BioMed Central, the latest place where the influential CPC scientists have formally claimed that their obviously faulty paper is flawless.

Importantly, I have documented - in Sections 1-10 at <http://www.australianparadox.com/> - what I consider to be a clear breach of the National Health and Medical Research Council's Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research. In particular, according to the NHMRC, "research misconduct" includes, amongst other things:

(i) "recklessness or gross and persistent negligence";

(ii) "serious consequences, such as false information on the public record"; and

(iii) "failure to declare and manage serious conflicts of interest": Sections 7 and 10

at http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/files_nhmrc/publications/attachments/r39.pdf

I encourage the Academic Board of the University of Sydney to initiate the official investigation I respectfully requested last week: <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/Letter-UoS-Academic-Board.pdf> And if what I've claimed in this unsettling episode turns out to be correct - as it is - the CPC's highly influential scientists should be removed from positions supported by taxpayer funding and especially those touching on matters of public health.

CPC answer: Unknown. Perhaps journalists should ask CPC head Professor Stephen Simpson -

<http://sydney.edu.au/science/people/stephen.simpson.php> - and University of Sydney Vice-Chancellor Dr Michael Spence what they are planning to do about this slowly inflating *Australian Paradox* scandal.

ENDPIECE

Readers, the fact that the University of Sydney's highest-profile food-and-health researchers - with business links to the sugar and sugary food/drink industries - have tried hard to exonerate modern sugar consumption - including via sugary softdrinks - as a key driver of obesity and type 2 diabetes is a problem because added sugar is, in fact, a menace to public health (see the various links above and below).

This *Australian Paradox* scandal is particularly unsettling because it is widely known that the sugar industry does not cuddle up to universities in an effort to improve public health and boost scientific integrity. The sugar industry simply wants the university's stamp of credibility on pro-sugar nonsense in order to misinform the public debate.

For example, in the US, "Big Sugar" set out in the 1950s to scramble and mislead science on the links between modern sugar consumption and chronic diseases. Along the way, Harvard University in the 1960s and 1970s became America's "most public defender" of "modern sugar consumption" as harmless, its "science" reportedly corrupted by heavy funding from the sugar and sugary food/drink industries: <http://www.motherjones.com/environment/2012/10/sugar-industry-lies-campaign>

In Australia, the University of Sydney is home to our highest-profile defenders of sugar and sugary softdrinks as harmless: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/health-science/a-spoonful-of-sugar-is-not-so-bad/story-e6f8g8y6-1226090126776>; <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/diabetes.pdf>

Readers, as you have seen, we cannot trust the information that the University of Sydney is pumping into the public debate. We cannot trust "peer reviewed" Group of Eight "science". For over a year and a half, the University of Sydney has known that the public debate is being misinformed and that the "scientific record" has been compromised. And it has done nothing to fix the problem. Taxpayers deserve better from the University's underperforming senior management.

Please correct me if you think that any of my analysis above is factually incorrect or otherwise unreasonable. I know I have a tendency to be long-winded - and I apologise for that - but I hope I have convinced at least a few of you that it is important for public health - and for perceptions about research integrity at the University of Sydney in general and at the fledgling Charles Perkins Centre in particular - that the extraordinarily faulty *Australian Paradox* paper be corrected or retracted without further unreasonable delay.

Best wishes,
Rory

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rory robertson

[economist and former-fattie](#)

Are you getting fat and sick? Want to stop trends in your family and friends towards obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease and cancer? Well, it's time to stop eating and drinking sugar.

That's because modern rates of (refined/added) sugar consumption - including via sugary drinks - are a key driver of global obesity, type 2 diabetes and heart disease. Moreover, like tobacco and alcohol, sugar appears to be carcinogenic: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDaYa0AB8TQ&feature=youtu.be>

Between minutes 26 and 28 in the link above, prominent US cancer researcher Louis Cantley says added sugar - what most Australians are getting from softdrinks, energy drinks, popular breakfast cereals and yoghurts, etc - causes cancer.

Professor Cantley says added sugar "scares" him and he tries to ELIMINATE IT COMPLETELY from his diet. Food for thought. Are there any good reasons for kids and others eating and drinking lots of sugar not to be advised - as with smoking - to stop right now?

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>

Click and scroll down for a time-tested diet to reverse obesity and type 2 diabetes: <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/why-we-get-fat.pdf>

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 in <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2013/198/7/characteristics-community-level-diet-aboriginal-people-remote-northern-australia>

Isn't it ironic (or worse): The Charles Perkins Centre's highest-profile food-and-health experts have devoted themselves to falsely exonerating sugar as a menace to public health!

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

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.php>