



Links between food manufacturers and Spanish health institutions are highlighted in report

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“Dangerous liaisons between the food industry and health institutions” have been highlighted in a report by VSF Global Food Justice, an organisation that aims to curb agribusiness and defend food sovereignty.¹

The report, *Confiad en Mí [Trust Me]*, published on 21 July, described attempts by brands such as AB Sugar, Danone, Nestlé, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Ferrero, Bimbo, Panrico, and Nutrexa to link the image of unhealthy products to health by lobbying through medical societies, universities, the media, and other public and private organisations.

Its author, Ferran García, denounced “the continuous and scandalous collaboration of public bodies with the food industry,” highlighting how this lobby has promoted or funded institutions to disseminate scientific research in line with the interests of the industry and distort messages about the effect of sugar and bad food habits.

“There are no good or bad foods, but healthy or unhealthy lifestyles” is a common message among these institutions. For example, the Institute of Studies on Sugar and Beet (IEDAR), created in collaboration with sugar manufacturers, has received grants from the government while claiming “insufficient evidence” to link sugar consumption to cardiovascular disease, obesity, or diabetes.²

Artiach (Adam Foods), the manufacturer of Dinosaurus—dinosaur shaped biscuits containing 21% sugar and 19% fat—sponsors the Spanish Association of Pediatrics (AEP). Paediatricians can request free samples of the biscuits online (www.dinosauruspediatras.es/), and the product packaging describes the AEP as a “collaborating institution.” The AEP has also stated, “There are no good or bad foods . . . Biscuits, like other forms of cereals, are good tools towards a varied and healthy diet.”³

Chocapic, a brand of Nestlé’s breakfast cereals with “one of the worst nutritional profiles,” said García, also claims to “collaborate” with the AEP, although the AEP has not provided details on the financial nature of this agreement. Artiach, Nestlé, Danone, and Coca-Cola Spain contribute funding to the AEP’s annual congress.⁴

Coca-Cola Spain and Aquarius have sponsored recommendations on hydration for pregnant women, elderly people, and the general population—in collaboration, respectively, with the Spanish Society of Gynaecology and Obstetrics (SEGO),⁵ the Spanish Society of Geriatrics and Gerontology (SEGG),⁶ and the General Council of Official

Colleges of Pharmacists (CGCOF).⁷ They have all advised drinking “beverages containing minerals and rapidly absorbed sugars.”

Coca-Cola has organised the National Congress on Hydration in association with several universities, research centres, and medical societies such as the Spanish Society of Primary Care Physicians (SEMERGEN) and the Spanish Society of Family and Community Medicine (SEMFYC). The Madrid Declaration of the congress’s scientific committee stated that “besides water it recommends drinking liquids and beverages of different flavours including caloric and non-caloric soft drinks, because their consumption is easier and more pleasant.”⁸

José Polo, vice president of SEMERGEN, said, “We have supported the congress but have not endorsed any document.” In exchange, the company funds his society’s annual congress, he explained.⁹

Salvador Tranche, vice president of SEMFYC, said that he did not remember how the society came to participate in the congress. He said that SEMFYC collaborated in a similar event in 2008 after the Ministry of Health and Consumer Affairs requested the society’s support for the “Don’t Get Dehydrated!” campaign, organised by the Association of Soft Drinks through its Observatory of Hydration and Health. The campaign promoted soft drinks because “the taste of beverages helps people to drink the necessary amount.”¹⁰

The society did not receive remuneration from Coca-Cola or the Association of Soft Drinks for these activities and had no agreement with them, said Tranche; neither did it encourage the consumption of high calorie drinks.

The *Confiad en Mí* report has also highlighted that Ángela López de Sá, former director of the Spanish Agency for Consumer Affairs, Food Safety and Nutrition (AECOSAN)—under the Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality—was previously director of scientific and regulatory issues for Coca-Cola Spain. At AECOSAN she worked on the national legislation on food issues and represented Spain in developing the corresponding EU legislation. The agency co-finances the THAO programme against childhood obesity, and Nestlé is a founding sponsor of the programme.¹¹

The report also noted the sponsorship of university chairs such as the Danone Chair of Child and Adolescent Health at the University of Barcelona and that city’s Hospital Sant Joan de Déu, as well as its involvement in campaigns such as “A soda, your best fuel”—promoted by the Royal Automobile Club of

Spain, the Association of Soft Drinks, and the General Directorate of Traffic, to persuade tired drivers that a soda provides “the necessary levels of glucose to the brain” to perk them up.¹²

The Spanish Federation of Food and Beverage Industries is one of the sponsors of the “Manifesto for a responsible communication on food and health,” developed by the Spanish National Health Journalist Association, the report added.

The author was a member of the Spanish National Health Journalist Association (Asociación Nacional de Informadores de la Salud; ANIS) from 2008 to 2013. He has been paid for giving lectures at a course on health journalism organised by ANIS and the Complutense University of Madrid that he had attended previously. He also works as an actor and has been paid for a commercial for 7 Up (PepsiCo) in 2013. Full disclosure at: www.bmj.com/about-bmj/freelance-contributors/aser-garcia-rada.

thebmj.com Feature: Sugar: spinning a web of influence (*BMJ* 2015;350:h231, doi:10.1136/bmj.h231, www.bmj.com/content/350/bmj.h231/infographic)

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Cite this as: *BMJ* 2015;351:h4207

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