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Sugar: New Villain?

Health by headlines continues, this time, from one of the Journals of the American Medical Association. The headlines revolved around how the sugar industry influenced research and scientific publications in the 1950s through the 1980s. A group of researchers, affiliated with the Philip Lee Institute for Health Policy Studies, examined documents from the Sugar Research Foundation and correspondence between scientists who examined research on the role fat and sugar play in the development of cardiovascular disease. The scientists involved have all died; this was an examination of their papers archived in the universities where they spent their careers as well as the research published in scientific journals.

The bottom line was that the SRF funded the publication of scientific papers which capitalized on the prevailing thought that fat and cholesterol were the causes of heart disease while sugar did not contribute to CVD. The correspondence illustrated the wishes of the SRF to publish the bad about fat and the neutrality of sugar in CVD.

The key was that back then full disclosure of funding sources were not necessary to get a paper published. There was a presumption that all scientists were neutral. Turns out that's not quite true. Is this shocking? Not to me. Was it wrong? Tough to say. There were no clandestine meetings in parking garages with payoffs. No data were found to be falsified. Even today, the relationship between specific food intake and disease is still more theory than proven fact.

The authors claimed that if an alternative theory of the development of CVD based on sugar intake had been known, public health policy and education could have focused on sugar as a cause of CVD as well. They suggest that knowing it would have made a difference in the rate of CVD over the last 70 years.



Was this worth the headlines it got? The electrons that were used to publish it? Was this significant? I'll let you know on Saturday.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

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