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Is Sugar the Problem?

The questions I left you with on [Thursday](#) were related to the press and scientific reaction to the article about the sugar industry published in JAMA Internal Medicine. Was it worth all the press on CNN, Time, and even Treehugger.com? I don't see it that way and I'll explain why.

The Article

The paper in JAMA was not a study (1); it was a review of correspondence and papers published in the 1950s and 1960s. It was more investigative journalism than science. That doesn't make it bad, but there was no collection of data or statistical analysis. There was an interpretation of industry reports, correspondence between scientists who were paid by the sugar industry, and a review of the published papers.

The article began with an extended quote from a report by the head of the Sugar Research Foundation (SRF) on the state of the sugar industry to the American Society of Sugar Beet Technologists in 1954. He pointed out that if the emphasis for cardiovascular disease (CVD) was a reduction in fat intake, that presented an opportunity for the sugar industry to take advantage of that gap in calories. Before you become outraged, you have to remember that there was no science to suggest that sugar was related to any disease at that time. The report contained other fascinating remarks about artificial sweeteners and more; you can find the entire article at the link below (2).

The rest of the JAMA article focused on the correspondence between scientists who were hired to analyze the research on the relationship between sugar and CVD. The expectation of the SRF was to refute the relationship, if any existed. Again, we're dealing with the late 1960s. I reviewed some of the articles that were cited in the research paper and some I found myself. Even when taken in large doses, sugar did not affect cholesterol levels; it did affect triglyceride levels but even through today, the data are not clear that high triglycerides are related to CVD.

The two review papers were published in the New England Journal of Medicine in 1967 by the scientists who worked with the SRF. They concluded that cholesterol and saturated fats were the culprit in the development of CVD, which was the accepted belief at that time. Hence, according to the recent JAMA paper, the entire landscape of dietary recommendations was influenced to embrace carbohydrates and sugar. If it hadn't been, the authors argue that lives could have been saved.

Why This Hit the Headlines

The collusion between the scientists and industry formed the basis for the headlines. This was before scientific and medical journals required financial disclosures; that policy began about 1984. But the question is not whether the sugar industry influenced the science; there's no question that every food manufacturer tries to put their best foot forward even today. While disclosure rules have changed, industry influence never goes away.

The real question is whether they influenced public policy related to sugar intake—not carbohydrate intake, but sugar intake. Moreover, even if they did, did it matter to our rate of CVD?

Maybe they did, but no, it didn't matter.



Even going back to the original Dietary Guidelines published in 1977, sugar intake was recommended to be 10% or less of the daily caloric intake (3). Vegetables, fruit, and whole grains were supposed to be the focus of the dietary intake in those guidelines and every iteration of it since. The JAMA article didn't mention that.

Furthermore, the dietary cause of CVD is not saturated fat. It's not cholesterol. It's not carbohydrates. It's not sugar. The cause is that we just eat too much of **everything**, including fat and sugar. The studies related to sugar intake and triglycerides they cited in the JAMA article always provided a large amount of calories from sugar. What has never been established is whether someone who actually consumes the Dietary Guidelines, and thus fewer than 10% of their calories from sugar, has an increased risk of CVD—or even 20 or 30% of their calories from sugar providing they don't exceed their caloric needs. The focus should be on the amount of food first (total calories), then the diet's composition. Very smart scientists just seem to blow right by that one.

The Bottom Line

This article was interesting because it provided a look into the way the food industry attempted to influence science. There's no doubt that if the documents were available, the same would be true for the beef industry, the corn industry, soy, you name it. This is not a surprise.

It's interesting for the lay person, but that's all it is. Whether we eat a high-carbohydrate sugar-laden diet or a low-carbohydrate sugar-free diet, we will become overweight if we eat more than we should and it will increase our risk of disease. If you want more information on this, listen to *Straight Talk on Health* this weekend.

Eat less. Eat better. Move more.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

References:

1. AMA Intern Med. doi:10.1001/jamainternmed.2016.5394
2. <http://bit.ly/2d33XmH>
3. <http://bit.ly/2cUDYdP>

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