

Sugar Demons, Sweet Lobbies and Taxes in Australia

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Featured image: George Christensen

*It came across on the ABC's [Four Corners](#) as something of a junkie's confession: I am an addict, and I know. The conservative MP for the Australian federal seat of Dawson, **George Christensen**, was not mincing words so much as spouting them in crude confessional form. Regulating the sugar industry by means of a levy or tax ignored personal responsibility.*

"I think that a lot of the issue with obesity has got to come back to telling people that they are personally responsible for the choices they make." He was a "fat bloke" who had made regrettable health decisions. He had to accept the consequences of those food choices that found their way down his "gob".

Christensen is not merely a representative of a federal seat, but representative of a country that has found its way to physical hugeness. Australia has become one of the fattest nations on the planet, rippling with health worries. [Sixty percent](#) of its populace is overweight or obese. By 2025, the figure will be 80 percent. It is such figures that have officials and those preoccupied with health policy irate and alarmed.

Christensen's individualist acceptance is standard form for industries that have found certain costs and regulations unnecessary and damaging to the purse strings. No changes of behaviour, goes the argument, will be induced by such a sugar levy. But the sweet lobby in Canberra has moneyed depth and financial dogmatism to pursue this variation of free will gone wrong.

"Big industry knows," [observes](#) former ACT health minister **Michael Moore**, "that if you're going to have influence then you're going to have to talk to members [of parliament]."

Australia's representatives, notably those in designated "sugar seats", have been taking note of the food and beverages lobby for some time. Where there is a sugar industry, there are votes to be had, beasts to be propitiated. The Beverages Council's Annual Report in 2016 strikes a certain note of pride in spending a "vast amount of resources" in fighting proponents of a sugar tax, notably those in the major political parties.

What matters here is the global profile of the sugar industry, one sustained by the same tactical profile as the tobacco lobby. Tactics of minimisation and distortion, packaged by a

covering of legitimacy regarding research and health effects, dominate the sugar lobbyist's agenda.

Such research has a long and compromised history in the annals of nutrition. Along with various co-authors, **Christin Kearns** published in [JAMA Internal Medicine](#) a jaw dropping 2016 study using documents of the Sugar Research Foundation. The investigation showed how some five decades of research on nutrition and heart disease was aggressively cooked by the sugar industry.

"Together with other recent analyses of sugar industry documents, our findings," concluded the authors, "suggest the industry sponsored a research program in the 1960s and 1970s that successfully cast doubt about the hazards of sucrose while promoting fat as the dietary culprit in CHD (coronary heart disease)."

That's what you get when doling out some \$50,000 in modern money terms to scientists, even in the academically rigorous environs of Harvard University. With appropriate findings cobbled, the result was a skewed and influential publication in the [New England Journal of Medicine \(Aug 1967\)](#). No conflict of interest with the sugar industry was published, but the brief exonerating sugar as a major risk factor in CHD was advanced.

Marion Nestle of the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies in NYU [did go softly](#) on the scientists who had conducted the research in the 1960s.

"Whether they did this deliberately, unconsciously, or because they genuinely believed saturated fat to be the great threat is unknown." That said, "science is not supposed to work this way. The documents make this review seem more about public relations than science."

Prior to that, sugar barons were already keen to exploit a deceptive nutritional claim by a simple strategy of avoidance. The link between sugar-rich diets and heart disease would be overlooked in favour of the chosen enemies of dietary fat and cholesterol. Americans keen on reducing fat in their diets, and consequential cholesterol formation, could still be encouraged to consume sugar.

As the SRF president in 1954 claimed [in a speech](#) to the American Society of Sugar Beet Technologists,

"If the carbohydrate industries were to capture this 20 percent of the calories in the US diet (the difference between the 40 percent which fat has and the 20 percent which it ought to have) and if sugar maintained its present share of the carbohydrate market, this change would mean an increase in the per capita consumption of sugar more than a third with a tremendous improvement in general health."

Specific companies in the sugar business remain the big boys and girls of obfuscation in the world of nutrition science. In league with them are members of the nutrition fraternity such as [exercise scientist Steven N. Blair](#), who find it reluctant on the padding of appropriate industry sponsorship to libel sugar and its role in causing obesity and Type 2 diabetes.

Strong patrons, in short, make for poor, or at the very least questionable research. In 2015, [The New York Times](#) found that Coca-Cola, the single dominant producer of sugary beverages, supplied millions in terms of funding to researchers to identify (or not, as the case was) links between sugar consumption and obesity. The focus there was to get more exercise and get over a near clinical obsession on the part of Americans to be weight-conscious.

Coca-Cola, ever mindful of sustaining its appeal, has adopted the similar health and exercise offensive in other markets. In 2016, it was revealed that [\\$1.7 million](#) was expended by the company on fitness groups and academics in Australia alone. **Professor Tim Olds** of the University of South Australia saw no problems in pocketing \$400,000 from the company for an international study on obesity.

“I think, frankly,” [he sneered](#), “this is old-style superannuated chardonnay socialism.”

Those from the food industry continue to draw miffed distinctions between the effects of sugar, and the impacts of other behaviours.

“There’s no safe level of smoking,” [claimed Geoff Parker](#), CEO of the Australian Beverages Council, “and so we refute any sort of comparison between what’s happening with reducing the prevalence of smoking with reducing the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages.”

No nanny-state will do for Parker – not even a health conscious one. The sugar demons still have the upper hand.

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