



Coca-Cola contracts could allow it to “quash” unfavourable research findings

Elisabeth Mahase

The BMJ

Coca-Cola might be able to suppress unfavourable findings from health research it funds at public universities in the United States and Canada, a new study has found.¹

Researchers studied over 87 000 documents obtained through freedom of information requests and found several clauses that allow the drinks giant to terminate research projects without reason and walk away with the data.

Coca-Cola funds research in the fields of nutrition, physical inactivity, and energy balance. It publishes a list of the funding it has allocated from 2010 to the present on its transparency website.²

The research team, from the University of Cambridge, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the University of Bocconi, and non-profit group US Right to Know, looked at five research agreements made with four universities: Louisiana State University, University of South Carolina, University of Toronto, and the University of Washington.

They found that, although the contracts show that Coca-Cola does not have day-to-day control of the research, it has various rights throughout the process, including the right to receive updates, comment on findings before publication, and terminate studies early without reason.

This is despite Coca-Cola’s website stating that “in no event does The Coca-Cola Company have the right to prevent the publication of research results.”

The study, published in the *Journal of Public Health Policy*, argues that these measures allow Coca-Cola to prevent the publication of unfavourable results, although to date it found no evidence of this happening in the emails obtained.

The authors are now calling on corporate funders to publish lists of terminated studies and on scientists to publish industry agreements to show that their findings are free from influence.

Lead author Sarah Steele, from the University of Cambridge, said: “Coca-Cola have declared themselves at the forefront of transparency when it comes to food and beverage giants funding health research. In fact, our study suggests that important research might never see the light of day, and we would never know about it.

“We are already hearing accusations from experts in nutrition that the food industry is copying tactics from big tobacco’s

playbook. Corporate social responsibility has to be more than just shiny websites stating progressive policies that get ignored.”

Gary Ruskin, from US Right to Know—the group that submitted the freedom of information requests—said: “With the power to trumpet positive findings and bury negative ones, Coke-funded science seems more like an exercise in public relations.”

Previous correspondence between The Coca-Cola Company and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showed the drinks giant’s efforts to influence the agency’s approach to tackling obesity, including shifting blame away from sugar sweetened beverages.³

This came after a *BMJ* investigation found how Coca-Cola had shaped obesity science and steered public health policy towards its own interests in China.⁴

A spokesperson for the Coca-Cola Company said that the company had not independently funded research on issues related to health and wellbeing in line with its 2016 research guiding principles.⁵

They added: “Additionally, a list of health and wellbeing research funded by The Coca-Cola Company dating back to 2010 has been disclosed on our transparency website for nearly four years. Research funded by The Coca-Cola Company and disclosed on our site is expected to be conducted in accordance with our publicly stated approach to funding scientific research, including the fact that we do not have the right to prevent the publication of research results nor do we provide funding conditioned on the outcome of the research.”

- 1 Steele S, Ruskin G, McKee M, Stuckler D. “Always read the small print”: a case study of commercial research funding, disclosure and agreements with Coca-Cola. *J Public Health Policy* 2019. 10.1057/s41271-019-00170-9.
- 2 Coca-Cola. Our commitment to transparency. <https://www.coca-colacompany.com/transparency/our-commitment-transparency>
- 3 Iacobucci G. Coca-Cola and obesity: study shows efforts to influence US Centers for Disease Control. *BMJ* 2019;364:l471. 10.1136/bmj.l471.30700409
- 4 Greenhalgh S. Making China safe for Coke: how Coca-Cola shaped obesity science and policy in China. *BMJ* 2019;364:k5050.
- 5 Coca-Cola. guiding principles for well-being scientific research and third party engagement. <https://www.coca-colacompany.com/our-company/guiding-principles-for-well-being-scientific-research-and-third->

Published by the BMJ Publishing Group Limited. For permission to use (where not already granted under a licence) please go to <http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/permissions>