Researchers have labelled the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) an industry front group, after studying thousands of documents from the influential sponsor of published research on nutrition and health.

Writing in the journal Globalization and Health, researchers from the University of Cambridge in England, Bocconi University in Italy, and the US Right to Know campaign called ILSI a “case study” that “serves as a caution to those involved in global health governance to be wary of putatively independent research groups.”

Sarah Steele, lead author from the University of Cambridge, said, “Our findings only continue to add to the evidence that this non-profit organisation has been used by its corporate backers for years to counter public health policies.

“We contend that the International Life Sciences Institute should be regarded as an industry group—a private body—and regulated as such, not as a body acting for the greater good.”

Freedom of information request

ILSI describes its mission as promoting “global partnerships for a healthier world” and providing “science that improves human health and well-being and safeguards the environment.” Its mission statement declares, “ILSI does not lobby, conduct lobbying activities, or make policy recommendations.”

But this claim, said the researchers, is undermined by over 17,000 pages of emails and other documents that US Right to Know obtained from ILSI, a non-profit organisation based in Washington, DC, through a freedom of information request.

Prominent among these are the emails of Alex Malaspina, ILSI’s founder and former vice president of Coca-Cola.

Malaspina, a long time president of ILSI, corresponded with a network of academics, doctors, industry executives, and eventually his successors in the charity’s leadership. The group commented on regulatory policy and how to influence it, often appearing to use the terms “we” or “us” as a synonym for industry.

In one email sent after new US dietary guidelines took a stronger line on sugar, Malaspina wrote, “Dear friends, these guidelines are a real disaster! They could potentially affect us significantly in many ways: soft drink taxations, modified school luncheon programs, a strong educational effort to educate children and adults to significantly limit their sugar intake, curtail advertising of sugary foods and beverages and eventually a great pressure from CDC [the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] and other agencies to force industry to start reducing drastically the sugar we add to processed foods and beverages.

“Also we have to expect that many nations will follow the US guidelines. We have to consider how to become ready to mount a strong defense.”

In another email he described “the mess ILSI Mexico is in because they sponsored in September a sweeteners conference when the subject of soft drinks taxation was discussed. ILSI is now suspending ILSI Mexico, until they correct their ways.”

In other emails from 2015 Malaspina complained to Barbara Bowman, director of the CDC’s division for heart disease and stroke prevention, about the increasing coldness towards ILSI from the World Health Organization—whose director general, Margaret Chan, was then fashioning a harder line against sugary drinks. He noted that he had managed to smooth relations under a previous WHO leader through direct contact but found Chan inaccessible.

Current WHO leaders “do not want to work with industry,” he complained, adding, “Something must be done.”

He suggested recruiting a top scientist or a “US government scientist” to approach Chan; Bowman suggested several alternative avenues. That email exchange was published in the media in 2016. The CDC’s Bowman, herself a former Coca-Cola scientist, announced her retirement days later.

Donations

Brenda Fitzgerald, who was appointed by President Trump in 2017 to run the CDC, also corresponded frequently with ILSI’s leadership. She resigned from her CDC post after news of her tobacco investments surfaced.

WHO was criticised in 2016 after Alan Boobis, ILSI vice president, chaired a meeting to establish policy on the weedkiller glyphosate. ILSI had previously taken more than $1m (£788 000; €888 000) in donations from a leading glyphosate manufacturer, Monsanto, and an affiliated lobbying group. WHO finally cut its formal ties with ILSI in 2017.

The European Parliament temporarily suspended funding of the European Food Safety Authority in 2012, after conflict of interest allegations surfaced involving ILSI members on its board.

One industry leader, Mars Co, quit ILSI last year, explaining in a statement, “We do not want to be involved in advocacy-led...
studies that so often, and mostly for the right reasons, have been criticised.”

A BMJ investigation in January found that staff at ILSI China had “unparalleled access to government officials”—their offices are located inside the headquarters of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention—and had successfully steered China’s thinking on obesity prevention towards a focus on exercise and away from sugar reduction, in line with industry’s goals.5

ILSI was approached for comment but had not responded by the time of publication.

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.”³

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 health and wellbeing in line with its 2016 research guiding principles.⁴ 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.”

3 Iacobucci G. Coca-Cola and obesity: study shows efforts to influence US Centers for Disease Control. BMJ 2019;364:k5050. 10.1136/bmj.k5050 30700409

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

NEWS
US public health agency is sued over failure to release emails from Coca-Cola

Martha Rosenberg

Chicago

US Right to Know, a campaign group for transparency in the food industry, has sued the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) over its failure to release correspondence between agency officials and current and former employees of Coca-Cola requested under freedom of information rules. Within days of filing the suit on 21 February the group said that it had received a small batch of new documents from the CDC. Asked whether the quick response was an attempt to stop the lawsuit, Gary Ruskin, co-director of US Right to Know, said "possibly," but the group still sought the additional emails specified in the suit “to uncover the extent and nature of the CDC’s relationship with Coca-Cola.”

Coca-Cola provides funding to a host of medical organizations including the American Heart Association, the American Lung Association, the American College of Cardiology, and the American Academy of Pediatrics. It also contributes to Harvard Medical School/Partners in Health, other major universities, recreation and fitness groups, and ethnic and minority organizations.

The drinks maker also funds the CDC itself through the non-profit CDC Foundation, created by Congress in 1992 to encourage relationships between CDC and industry. Last year The BMJ reported on Coca-Cola’s secret influence on medical and science journalists by funding journalism conferences, including those held by the nonprofit National Press Foundation, based in Washington, DC. US Right to Know hopes that the lawsuit will further expose Coca-Cola’s influence on CDC personnel and policies. “Why should the CDC let Coca-Cola lobby it?” asked Ruskin. “The government should not be for sale. It is destructive of public trust.”

Previous emails obtained by US Right to Know have shown that Barbara Bowman, former director of the CDC’s Division for Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention, agreed to try to help Alex Malaspina, a Coca-Cola strategist and former executive, to soften the World Health Organization’s stance on soft drinks. WHO published a new sugar guideline in 2015 and the next year blamed full sugar soft drinks for rising child obesity around the world, especially in developing countries.

In 2014 Bowman, a former Coca-Cola employee, wrote in an email to Wamwari Waichungo, a Coca-Cola vice president, asking him to “please change to my personal email address.” Bowman left the CDC in June 2017. Among the current or former CDC officials whose correspondence with Coca-Cola the lawsuit seeks is Michael Pratt, who served as senior adviser for global health at the agency until leaving for the University of California at San Diego in 2016. While working at the CDC Pratt was also scientific adviser to ILSI North America, a group founded by Coca-Cola’s Malaspina in 1978. Pratt has written at least seven papers funded by Coca-Cola including one in the journal Obesity, which found “no significant associations between dietary patterns and obesity” in the children studied.

The theory that obesity is caused primarily by a lack of exercise rather than excessive calories—called “energy balance”—is aggressively promoted by Coca-Cola to fighting falling sales. To spread the message Coca-Cola funded the Global Energy Balance Network, a US based nonprofit group, to the tune of $1.5m (€1.1m; £1.2m). Coca-Cola shaped the group’s messages and content and even helped choose its leaders. The network, widely reviewed as a front organization, was shut down in 2015.

To promote the “energy balance” theory Coca-Cola funded a $1m exercise program in Georgia overseen by Brenda Fitzgerald, a health commissioner who went on to become CDC director. Fitzgerald said that she would continue to accept Coca-Cola’s money as CDC director but resigned her post in January because of her holding of tobacco stocks.
Coca-Cola’s secret influence on medical and science journalists

A series of journalism conferences on obesity received covert funding from Coca-Cola. Paul Thacker investigates

Paul Thacker freelance journalist

Madrid, Spain

Industry money was used to covertly influence journalists with the message that exercise is a bigger problem than sugar consumption in the obesity epidemic, documents obtained under freedom of information laws show. The documents detail how Coca-Cola funded journalism conferences at a US university in an attempt to create favourable press coverage of sugar sweetened drinks. When challenged about funding of the series of conferences, the academics involved weren’t forthcoming about industry involvement.

For drinks manufacturers such as Coca-Cola the idea that consuming their products is fine as long as you exercise—reinforced with expensive advertising campaigns associated with sport—has been an important one. As Yoni Freedhoff, assistant professor of medicine at the University of Ottawa, told The BMJ, “For Coca-Cola the ‘energy balance’ message has been a crucial one to cultivate, as its underlying inference is that, even for soda drinkers, obesity is more a consequence of inactivity than it is of regularly drinking liquid candy.”

The six figure bill for funding these journalism conferences was more than repaid in favourable press coverage, say critics. Documented evidence of the industry’s covert influence on the media is rare. In 2004, researchers examined secret documents made public during tobacco litigation. Attempting to derail the effect of the US Environmental Protection Agency’s 1993 report on secondhand smoke, the tobacco industry successfully placed stories in major print publications about the report’s “scientific weakness” to help “build considerable reasonable doubt . . . particularly among consumers,” the researchers wrote. They concluded that even journalists can fall victim to well orchestrated public relations efforts, regardless of the quality of the science used in these PR exercises.

Coca-Cola funding at the University of Colorado

The story begins with articles last year in the New York Times and Associated Press on the Global Energy Balance Network, a now defunct “science based” collaboration between Coca-Cola and university scientists to tackle the obesity crisis. The company donated $1m to the University of Colorado, home institution of the Global Energy Balance Network’s president, James Hill, a professor of paediatrics. After experts criticised the network as a Coca-Cola ploy to shift the public’s perception of the causes of obesity from diet and consumption of sugary drinks to lack of exercise, the network shut down in December 2015. The University of Colorado later returned the money to Coca-Cola, and the company now declares its funding to external organisations on a website.

Not yet reported are several journalism conferences the University of Colorado ran with funding from Coca-Cola. Emails and documents obtained by The BMJ under freedom of information laws show that Coca-Cola began approaching professors at the university in early 2011 in an attempt to sway journalists. The tactic bore fruit. In one example, a CNN reporter attended the 2014 journalism conference and later contributed to a story that argued that obesity’s cause could be lack of exercise, not consumption of sugary soft drinks. Critics told The BMJ that Coca-Cola’s $37 000 support for that particular conference and the resulting story was a better bargain than an advertisement placed on CNN’s website.

Emails between Hill and Coca-Cola in 2011 detail the planning for a journalism conference that took place in early February 2012. Almost 20 journalists attended the conference, with assistance from the non-profit, Washington DC based National Press Foundation.

Some months after the event, Hill emailed a Coca-Cola executive and described the conference as a “home run,” adding, “The journalists told us this was an amazing event and they generated a lot of stories.” Hill continued, “You basically supported the meeting this year . . . I think we can get many more sponsors involved next year.”

Months later, the company agreed to send $45 000 to the University of Colorado Foundation for further support. In August 2013 Hill emailed Coca-Cola about another journalism conference on obesity held with the National Press Foundation in Madrid, and a medical conference held with the Association for the Study of Obesity in New York City.
Foundations. Emails and questions to the foundation suggest that it did not know about these conversations with Coca-Cola. Hill wrote to the company: “The conference was a great success and even better than last year. These journalist[s] came away with a much more realistic understanding of obesity. Thanks again for your support.” Hill apparently attached a report of the conference, as a Coca-Cola executive responded, “Have read the entire [report]—excellent. Count us in for next year.”

**Journalist complains**

But one journalist, Kristin Jones, became concerned about how these conferences were funded and complained to the National Press Foundation. The foundation’s president, Bob Meyers, passed on her concerns to Hill and fellow professor John Peters. Meyers told the professors that Jones was upset to hear that Coca-Cola provided $10 000 for the 2014 journalism conference, which she attended, and added that he had told Jones “that all we know about funding is that it came from the University of Colorado Foundation.”

Peters then told the National Press Foundation by email, “The funding for this came from our general educational grant resources.” Months later, Peters emailed Coca-Cola executives a report on the 2014 journalism conference, thanking them for the “educational grant that supported this work.”

“I feel like I was lied to,” Jones told *The BMJ*. Jones no longer works as a journalist but said that she would not have attended the conference had she known of Coca-Cola’s funding.

The National Press Foundation’s detailed report of the 2014 conference included comments from reporters who attended and listed stories they later wrote. At the top of the report is a prominent quote from reporter Jen Christensen of CNN: “You had all the rock stars of the obesity topic—the quality of the speakers you chose was incredible. Never have I been to such a helpful fellowship.” The report notes that, months after the conference, Christensen contributed to a CNN story titled, “Soda makers want to cut calories, but is diet really better?”

Christensen did not return repeated requests to comment for this story, nor did a reporter from National Public Radio who also attended.

**“Great business”**

Ottawa University’s Yoni Freedhoff commented, “It’s great business for Coca-Cola to fund the indoctrination of journalists in Coca-Cola friendly dogma, a fact I’d wager was clear to those experts who helped Coca-Cola to hide their involvement.”

The organiser of the conferences for the National Press Foundation was Bob Meyer, who has left the group. He did not respond to requests for comment. The foundation is now run by Sandy Johnson, who said by email that “a more appropriate sponsor of a journalist training program would be an organization such as Mayo Clinic, which did just that in February 2016.”

After reviewing several of the documents obtained by *The BMJ*, including the final 2014 report, Marion Nestle, professor of nutrition and public health at New York University, said that journalists should have realised that the programme was an industry event because of the choice of speakers and topics covered. One panel, for instance, featured representatives from McDonald’s and Coca-Cola discussing their corporate initiatives on obesity. Journalists appear to have been misled, but they should not have been so gullible, Nestle added. “Overall, this looks like an industry meeting framed as science, and the journalists bought into it. Coca-Cola got its money’s worth on this one.”

A Coca-Cola representative said that in September 2015 the company disclosed on its website the $45 000 funding to the University of Colorado for the journalism training programme in the spring of 2012. Before 2015 it wasn’t clear where the funding for the journalism programme was coming from. The University of Colorado told *The BMJ* that the university funded the 2014 journalism conference with $37 500 provided primarily by Coca-Cola Company for the Global Energy Balance Network. A university spokesperson told *The BMJ*, “Essentially funding for the conference came from a gift from Coke.”

Hill and Peters have not responded to *The BMJ*’s requests for comment.

Competing interests: I have read and understood BMJ’s policy on declaration of interests and declare: I have received travel funds from Harvard University to speak on corruption in academic research and from the University of Toronto Faculty of Law to speak on corruption in academic research and the Physician Payments Sunshine Act. I am on the board (unpaid) of the James Madison Project, a US group that helps journalists and others on Freedom of Information Act requests and litigation. I advise a research institute on its outreach regarding brain research. I am paid to write for several journalism outfits, including the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, Lucky Peach, and Huffington Post. I am being paid to advise and write for an upcoming documentary on the drug industry.

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

---


Coca-Cola’s secret influence on medical and science journalists

Clarification - This investigation (BMJ 2017;357:j1638, doi:10.1136/bmj.j1638) was based on documents, originally obtained by the organisation US. Right to Know, and later verified for authenticity by the General Counsel’s office at the University of Colorado.
Conflicts of interest compromise US public health agency’s mission, say scientists

Jeanne Lenzer

New York

Scientists at the United States’ public health agency have urged their employers to “clean up this house,” claiming that conflicts of interest are undermining trust in the agency.1

The scientists at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia, sent an anonymous letter at the end of August to Carmen S Villar, chief of staff at the CDC’s Office of the Director. They wrote, “It appears that our mission is being influenced and shaped by outside parties and rogue interests. “This ‘climate of disregard’ puts many of us in difficult positions. We are often directed to do things we know are not right.”

They claimed that “this unacceptable behavior” was widespread, adding, “These questionable and unethical practices threaten to undermine our credibility and reputation as a trusted leader in public health.

“We would like to see high ethical standards and thoughtful, responsible management restored at CDC. We are asking that you do your part to help clean up this house!”

The letter highlighted links between two CDC veterans—Barbara Bowman and Michael Pratt—and Coca-Cola as some of the problems at the agency.2,3

The letter and emails revealing internal problems at the CDC came to light after US Right to Know, a watchdog organization focusing on food and agricultural issues, filed freedom of information act requests relating to Bowman and Pratt.

Bowman, until recently the director of the agency’s Division for Heart Disease and Prevention, joined the CDC in 1992 after working as a senior nutritionist at Coca-Cola. She continued her ties with Coca-Cola while at CDC through the International Life Sciences Institute, an industry front organization whose members include multiple soda companies, including Coca-Cola, and the agricultural giant Monsanto.

Bowman resigned her position at CDC at the end of June, days after these ties became known.4

Pratt, a senior adviser for global health in the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention at the CDC, has led research funded by Coca-Cola and has also worked closely with the International Life Sciences Institute. One of Coca-Cola’s strategies to promote Coke has been to claim that exercise, not diet, is linked to obesity and related health problems. Emails show that Pratt discussed this strategy in his role as adviser to Coca-Cola’s “Exercise is medicine” initiative. Pratt currently works at the University of California, San Diego as a professor in the Division of Global Health.5

The letter also claimed that some resources for domestic work were being channeled into global health issues. “These actions do not serve the public well,” it said. “Why is nothing being done to address these problems?”

This is not the first time that conflicts of interest at the CDC have come to light. The agency took industry funding to support pro-industry positions for hepatitis C screening and for the flu drug oseltamivir (Tamiflu). It also oversaw controversial research funded by the sugar industry that purported to elucidate the sugar industry or minimize its role in causing deadly kidney failure among sugar cane workers in Latin America.6

The CDC did not respond to inquiries about the letter.


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