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Coca-Cola sought to shift blame for obesity by funding public health conferences, study reports

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The Coca-Cola Company worked with its sponsored researchers on topics to present at major international public health conferences in order to shift blame for rising obesity and diet related diseases away from its products onto physical activity and individual choice, according to a new report.¹

Academics in Australia and the US worked with US Right to Know, which lobbies for transparency in the food industry, to obtain and analyse emails between Coke and public health figures about events run by the International Society for Physical Activity and Health (ISPAH).

They analysed 36 931 pages of documents to identify exchanges referencing Coke's sponsorship of the International Congresses on Physical Activity and Public Health (ICPAPH) held in Sydney in 2012 and Rio de Janeiro in 2014.

Using a framework for examining corporate political activity they identified several themes, which included framing the debate; criticising public health advocates; and infiltrating, monitoring, and distracting advocates and organisations.

At odds with public statements that it was not involved, the paper reports that Coke was involved in selecting topics presented by its sponsored researchers at both congresses.

Gary Ruskin of US Right to Know said, "This unseemly conscription of public health conferences to serve up Coca-Cola's messaging erodes trust in the cause of public health. It's long past time for the public health community to transform itself into something that can't be bought or rented."

In one exchange, a senior executive used pejorative language in reference to published correspondence criticising Coke's sponsorship practices, "Firstly, yes, we helped to sponsor the 5th congress. We have been a major sponsor since this congress started 10 years ago. Secondly, we knew it was only a matter of time before a miscreant would write a comment about our sponsorship. And, yes, we will continue to sponsor key health and physical activity congresses in the future. We won't let the bastards keep us down."

Benjamin Wood, co-author of the report, said, "The process of generating and disseminating public health related research needs to be better protected. One step to achieving that is to eliminate all forms of sponsorship from firms active in health harming industries." The paper, published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, calls on the food industry to adopt the provisions set out in the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

Speaking to *The BMJ*, Jasper Schipperijn, president of the ICPAPH, noted that "none of the people

mentioned in the paper are, or have ever been, ISPAH board members," adding that local hosts were responsible for previous congresses.

He said, "While one email described in the paper presents correspondence that involved the chair of the 2014 ICPAPH scientific committee, ISPAH was not privy to this and were unaware that anyone involved in its organisation had been engaged in discussions with Coca-Cola."

"ISPAH fully agrees that the sponsorship provided by Coca-Cola for the 2012 and 2014 ICPAPH congresses was unfortunate. ISPAH has since developed a clear policy on partnerships and sponsorship and is now involved in decision making, particularly in relation to partners and sponsorship."

That 2017 policy states that "ISPAH does not work in partnership with or accept any financial support from organisations which have any objectives that are inconsistent with, or could be perceived to be inconsistent with, the promotion of health. This includes organisations which promote physical activity if they have other agendas which are not health promoting, for example sugar sweetened beverages or high fat foods."

A spokesperson for the Coca-Cola company said, "Coca-Cola does not influence the outcomes of any scientific study. The emails referenced pre-date a commitment we made in 2015 to disclose our funding for wellbeing scientific research and partnerships publicly. We also adopted guiding principles in 2016 that define our approach to health and wellbeing oriented research."

¹ Wood B, Ruskin G, Sacks G. How Coca-Cola shaped the international congress on physical activity and public health: an analysis of email exchanges between 2012 and 2014. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2020. doi: 10.3390/ijerph17220000