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The sugar industry's influence on policy

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In the Policy Forum “Was there ever really a ‘sugar conspiracy’?” (16 February, p. 747), D. M. Johns and G. M. Oppenheimer based their criticism of our research on news stories, press releases, a podcast, and a commentary, not our peer-reviewed papers (1, 2). Contrary to their assertions, our publications do indeed “focus on the evidence” and “follow the data.”

Our *JAMA Internal Medicine* paper (1) demonstrated that Harvard nutrition researchers McGandy, Hegsted, and Stare used a double standard when critiquing the epidemiologic, experimental, and mechanistic evidence linking sugar to heart disease in their Sugar Research Foundation (SRF)–funded 1967 *New England Journal of Medicine* review (3, 4). Hegsted’s beliefs and publications that were unfavorable to his meat and dairy industry sponsors have no bearing on our conclusions about the bias in his review on the health effects of sugar. Johns and Oppenheimer attempt to put the research in the context of the time, but “logic and tools” and “norms and standards” have always called upon scientists to apply objective criteria when evaluating evidence.

We did not conclude that McGandy *et al.*’s review “meaningfully shaped the course of dietary science and policy,” as asserted by Johns and Oppenheimer. Rather, we concluded

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that the sugar industry's sponsorship of this review, together with other historical and current evidence (5–8), suggests that the industry may have a long history of influence. Our recent *PLOS Biology* paper (2) further documented how SRF terminated funding for and failed to disclose or follow up on preliminary data in the 1970s that strengthened the emerging case—borne out by subsequent research (9)—that elevated triglycerides are a cardiometabolic risk factor and that sugar raises triglycerides.

Efforts to understand the impact of SRF's research program, which dates to 1943 (10), are hardly “ahistorical,” a “conspiratorial narrative,” or a “fallacy of emphasizing the machinations of one commodity sector.” Rather, they are a necessary step to providing critical context about these industries, which is currently missing from historical accounts and policy discussions.

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