

Nutrition Scientists on the Take from Big Food

Has the American Society for Nutrition lost all credibility?



The Coca-Cola Company



NATIONAL DAIRY COUNCIL

Kellogg's

MONSANTO



bell institute
OF HEALTH AND NUTRITION
GENERAL MILLS

Cargill



National Cattlemen's
Beef Association



THE
SUGAR ASSOCIATION



PEPSICO



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INTRODUCTION

The American Society for Nutrition (ASN), established in 1928, is the most well-known academic organization in the field of nutrition research; its current membership is about 5,000. ASN is also the publisher of three academic journals, including the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, one of the most respected journals in the field of nutrition.

As with other health professional organizations, such as the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics¹ and the American Academy of Family Physicians,² ASN has many problematic ties with the food and beverage industry. These ties can taint scientific objectivity, negatively impact the organization's policy recommendations, and result in industry-friendly research and messaging that is shared with nutrition professionals and the general public alike. Moreover, the media views health organizations like ASN as purveyors of independent and objective information,

largely unaware of the many connections with junk food and beverage giants.

You wouldn't know any of this from the group's lofty mission: to "develop and extend knowledge of nutrition of all species through fundamental, multidisciplinary, and clinical research; facilitate contact among investigators in nutrition, medicine and related fields of interest; support the dissemination and application of nutrition science to improve public health and clinical practice worldwide; promote graduate education and training of physicians in nutrition; provide reliable nutrition information to those who need it, and advocate for nutrition research and its application to development and implementation of policies and practices related to nutrition."³ Given these worthy goals and ASN's respected status, the organization's industry ties are all the more troubling.

BIG FOOD SPONSORS

ASN sponsors are referred to as “sustaining partners,” a moniker given to companies that pay at least \$10,000 a year.⁴ There are a total of thirty, including these Big Food players:



This list consists of purveyors of highly processed and minimally nutritious foods

and biotech giants. For their financial contributions, sustaining partners receive “print and online exposure, annual meeting benefits, and first choice to sponsor educational sessions, grants, awards and other opportunities as they arise.”⁵ In other words, food, beverage, supplement, biotech, and pharmaceutical industry leaders are able to purchase cozy relationships with the nation’s top nutrition researchers.

Although just a \$10,000 minimum annual contribution is required to be a sustaining partner, those who pay beyond that amount are especially rewarded. Exactly how much more is not disclosed, but we do know that ASN’s sustaining roundtable member committee “serves as an industry voice within [ASN].”⁶ Membership is composed of representatives from companies “that provide ASN with a specific level of unrestricted financial support,” an amount determined annually by the Board of Directors. The roundtable’s function “is to act as advisors to the Board of Directors with a mandate to ensure a broad science-based discussion of nutrition and translation of that science to consumers to improve their healthy selection of diet.” ASN’s “Sustaining Member Roundtable Committee”⁷ includes Greg D. Miller, Chief Science Officer at National Dairy Council and Mehmood Khan, PepsiCo’s Chief Scientific Officer.

Big Dairy featured on ASN’s “Sustaining Partner” page⁸



“As a Sustaining Partner, I value the role ASN plays as a science-based resource on nutrition. I believe its Public Policy efforts and Public Information activities are critical to keeping nutrition science intertwined in the public health dialogue.” The National Dairy Council also values

ASN’s “scientific journals ... and the ASN annual meeting, an opportunity to learn the most current science and network with friends and collaborators.”

— GREGORY D. MILLER, PH.D., M.A.C.N.,
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, RESEARCH, REGULATORY AND SCIENTIFIC AFFAIRS, NATIONAL DAIRY COUNCIL (NDC)

That the nation’s leading professional organization for nutrition researchers is proud to display a quote from the National Dairy Council on its website is troubling. Hardly an objective arbiter of science, the National Dairy Council has a significant economic interest in

: maintaining dairy’s prominence in the American diet. But as a previous report from Eat Drink Politics documented - *Whitewashed: How Industry and Government Promote Dairy Junk Foods*⁹ - most forms of dairy that Americans eat actually do more harm than good.

ANNUAL MEETING

ASN is one of several organizations represented at the Experimental Biology conference. The 5-day annual meeting consists of scientific sessions, poster sessions, and an expo hall. More than 14,000 attendees (including exhibitors) were expected at the 2015 meeting. Many of the sessions were sponsored by the food industry and dealt with topics that relate to different companies' product portfolios and the potential impact on industry practices and profits.

Of the 34 scientific sessions offered by ASN, each consisting of three to four panelists, 6 were supported by PepsiCo, and 3 were supported by the Mead Johnson Pediatric Nutrition Institute (Mead Johnson is one of the largest manufacturers of infant formula). Other supporters, with one session each,

included the Egg Nutrition Center, Kellogg, DuPont Nutrition and Health, Ajinomoto, and the National Dairy Council. Examples of specific sessions sponsored by PepsiCo are below.

In addition, the National Dairy Council sponsored a session on bone health, Kellogg sponsored a session emphasizing asking if "When We Eat is as Important as What We Eat?" and the International Life Sciences Institute (a front group for the food, beverage, and pharmaceutical industries) sponsored a session on "Low-Calorie Sweeteners and Health: What Does the Science Tell Us?" Speakers included John D. Fernstorm, a scientific advisor to ILSI and a scientific consultant for Ajinomoto, which produces aspartame. Several of ASN's sustaining partners sell products made with aspartame.

Pepsico sponsored sessions

- Resistant Starch, Microbiota and Gut Health. Resistant starch is one ingredient PepsiCo is hedging its bets on as a way to increase fiber and reduce calories in processed foods and beverages¹⁰
- Nutritional Approaches for Osteosarcopenic Obesity: Interrelationships between Bone, Muscle, and Fat, Aging and Chronic Disease RIS
- Moderate Alcohol Use, Nutrition and Chronic Disease: What We Know and Where to Go Next
- "One Nutrition": Clinical Nutrition Across Species





ASN sponsors at Experimental Biology annual meeting, March 2015.

Sponsorships Galore

In addition to the regular sessions at its meetings, ASN also offers satellite sessions, some of which are also sponsored by the food industry.¹¹ Companies pay ASN between \$15,000 and \$50,000 (depending on the session length) for such sponsorships, and the fee includes numerous marketing perks.¹² At the most recent meeting, PepsiCo sponsored a satellite session on oats (PepsiCo owns Quaker), while the Grocery Manufacturers Association (GMA), a lobbying group for the food and beverage industries, sponsored a symposium on the “neuro and systemic physiology underlying the regulation of

sodium appetite”. Per the symposium description, “public policy on sodium and health has focused on limiting the populations’ sodium intake for putative health concerns.” The use of the word “putative” is interesting since GMA represents many companies that sell highly processed foods that contain high amounts of sodium. Moreover, ASN claims that a prerequisite for being allowed to present under this program includes being “objective and balanced”. At the annual meeting, additional sponsorship opportunities include:¹³

- Hospitality Suite: \$35,000
- On-site Nutrition Program: \$25,000
- Scientific Sessions Poster Competition: \$25,000
- Reception for the Membership: \$25,000
- ASN Scientific Program Track Sponsorship: \$20,000
- ASN Partners and Leaders Reception: \$20,000
- Program Track Sponsorship: \$20,000
- Global Nutrition Council Reception: \$15,000
- Networking breakfast with members: \$15,000
- Attendee Afternoon Break Stations: \$7,000

Undisclosed Session Sponsorship?



While most of the sponsored sessions disclose the corporate funder, sometimes the connection to Big Food is less obvious. For example, one sponsored satellite session at the recent annual meeting was called “Sweeteners and Health: Current Understandings, Recent Research Findings and Directions



ASN “award partners” at Experimental Biology annual meeting, March 2015.

for Future Research”. It was sponsored by the “Rippe Lifestyle Institute”, which sounds innocuous, except that founder James Rippe has reportedly¹⁴ been paid a \$41,000 a month retainer by the Corn Refiners Association, a trade group that represents the makers of high fructose corn syrup. This lobbying organization has more than a passing interest in understanding “whether or not there is a linkage between sugar consumption

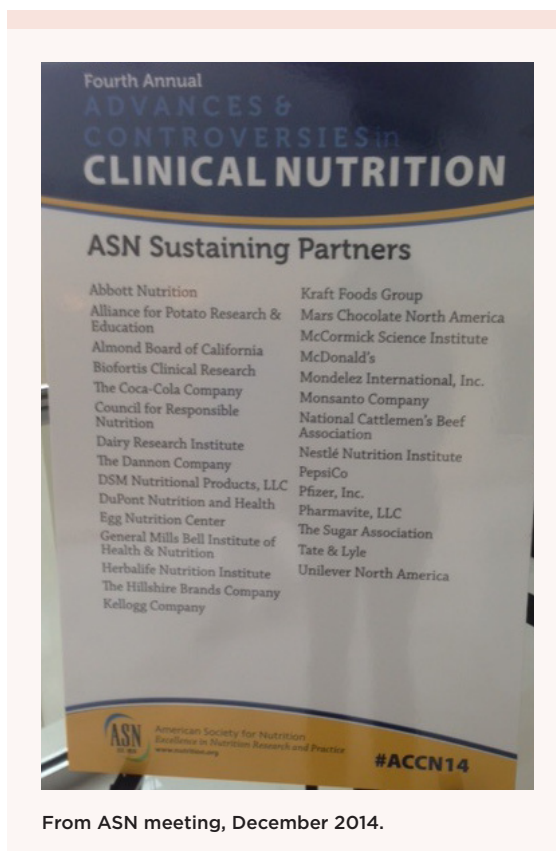
and obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease as well as other metabolic diseases” – one of the session’s listed “learning objectives”. Rippe has consulted for many other members of the junk food industry, including Coca-Cola, Dr. Pepper, McDonald’s, Kraft Foods, General Mills, and Kellogg.¹⁵ Obesity expert and physician Yoni Freedhoff recently uncovered this deception, which he referred to as “money laundering,” wondering if the corn lobby used Rippe’s name as “a novel means to money/conflict-launder the Corn Refiners’ agenda”.¹⁶ If they did, ASN was more than a willing participant.

Advances and Controversies – brought to you by Big Food

Another meeting put on by ASN is called Advances and Controversies in Clinical Nutrition. PepsiCo is the principal sponsor, and the Almond Board of California, Corn Refiners Association, Kraft Food, and The Solae Company (a soy ingredients supplier) are regular sponsors.¹⁷ A principal sponsorship costs \$25,000 and includes the following perks: Sponsorship of one conference track (with, room signage; pre-session slide; verbal acknowledgment; company materials displayed); recognition as principal sponsor in conference marketing materials; and one year of ASN Sustaining Membership.

The 2013 Exhibit guide for the Advances and Controversies in Clinical Nutrition conference listed the following conflicts of interest in its disclosure section for course directors and speakers:¹⁸

- The Beef Checkoff, DuPont Nutrition and Health, the Egg Nutrition Center; the



From ASN meeting, December 2014.

National Cattlemen's Beef Association, and the National Dairy Council

- ConAgra Foods, Gerber/Nestlé, and DuPont Nutrition
- McDonald's and PepsiCo
- Dairy Research Institute, Hershey, McDonald's and Unilever.

Obesity researcher David Allison wins the prize for the most conflicts: PepsiCo, The Sugar Association, World Sugar Research Organization, Red Bull, Kellogg, Mars, Campbell Soup and Dr. Pepper Snapple. Perhaps most troubling, Allison serves on the editorial board of the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, ASN's flagship publication. While his conflicts are disclosed,¹⁹ having Allison in such a critical gatekeeper role demonstrates how industry can potentially influence even the science that gets published.

POLICY INFLUENCE

ASN is not solely an organization of nutrition researchers who converse solely with each other at national meetings about their latest research findings. In its 2009 annual report,²⁰ the organization addresses its participation in public policy and advocacy. Some examples:

- Participated in a Partner with MyPyramid event hosted by the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion
- Submitted comments and oral testimony to the 2010 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee
- Addressed nutrition research within other pieces of legislation, including a bill calling for a White House Conference on Food and Nutrition.

That same report also provides context for ASN's role in informing and educating the public. The organization's Public Information Committee was created to "promote ASN as the premier source of sound nutrition science information to the media and public," and claims to uphold three values: 1) Objective Interpretation and Reporting of Nutrition Science; 2) Transparency in Decision-Making; and 3) Nutrition Literacy. Organization brochures and reports always paint an idealized picture of a group's operations, mission, and values. By its own admission, ASN is a bastion of science-based information that is meant to help the public above all else. Big Food Industry's ties with ASN,

however, along with two position papers, suggest otherwise.

Ode to Processed Foods

In April of 2014, ASN published an 18-page scientific statement in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* (one of its own journals, and also one of the top 100 most influential journals in biology and medicine) titled "Processed foods: contributions to nutrition."²¹ This scientific statement came at a time when food and beverage companies – many of them ASN sustaining partners – were coming under fire from health advocates for their highly processed, minimally nutritious products.

In fact, this scientific statement was published just one month after Brazil announced new dietary guidelines that mentioned preparing meals from "fresh foods", limiting consumption of "ready-to-consume" (AKA: processed) food and drink products, and choosing restaurants that serve freshly made meals.²² The guidelines specifically suggested avoiding fast food chains. These guidelines made headlines in the United States, as most health advocates consider these a model to follow. This came out just as our own federal government was in the midst of updating the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. ASN, instead, essentially drafted a defense of processed foods,

which included the following. It reads like talking points from a PR agency representing companies that make highly processed foods:

- 700,000 years ago, meat was added to the human diet, which resulted in cooking, drying, salting and smoking, all examples of food processing.
- In the 19th century, canning and pasteurization, more forms of food processing, helped enhance the shelf life of foods.
- In the 20th century, freezing, refrigeration, and vacuum packaging emerged as forms of food processing that increased shelf life and variety.
- There are no differences between the processing of foods at home or at a factory
- Cleaning, peeling, freezing, irradiation, extrusion, milling, and canning are all examples of food processing.
- Terms like “minimally processed” or “ultra-processed” are “value-laden and [do] not characterize foods in a helpful manner.”
- Commercial food processing is “poorly understood” and therefore “generates suspicion” among the general public, and extent of processing does not always result in a nutritionally inferior product.
- Processing food can help address the obesity epidemic through the creation of artificial sweeteners, nanotechnology and flavor chemistry, and “dynamic radiant frying” that can help lower the fat content of processed foods by one third.

This defense of processed foods from a nutrition organization makes sense considering ASN’s sustaining partners, all of whom have a financial stake in getting Americans to purchase

processed foods – whether it’s Kellogg’s Pop Tarts, General Mills’ Cookie Crisp Cereal, PepsiCo’s Doritos, or McDonald’s chicken nuggets.

At a time when Americans are increasingly recognizing that processed foods are not exactly healthy, ASN’s position is remarkably tone deaf. Even leading business media outlets are taking notice, much to the consternation of the junk food industry. Here are three examples of recent media reports that note this trend:

- *Fortune’s Special Report: The War on Big Food*: “Major packaged-food companies lost \$4 billion in market share alone last year, as shoppers swerved to fresh and organic alternatives. Can the supermarket giants win you back?”²³
- *Marketplace*: “Packaged food manufacturers are grappling with some big shifts in consumption trends. Sales of some of the top brands at General Mills, Kraft and the Campbell Soup Company have been slumping” as “big food companies struggle to meet the needs of millennials and moms who want fresher foods.”²⁴
- *The Wall Street Journal* reported how even mainstream big box retailer Target is now stocking more natural and less processed options, to reflect how “shoppers have long been shifting to fresh and healthy-sounding foods at the expense of canned and bagged goods in the aging center of the supermarket.”²⁵

Given this huge consumer shift in mainstream America, the nation’s nutrition researchers look pretty silly defending processed foods and “the aging center of the supermarket”.

In Defense of Sugar



Another important policy in the news lately is the labeling of added sugar on the Nutrition Facts label. The Food and Drug Administration proposed listing “added sugar” on the forthcoming updated Nutrition Facts panel, largely as a result of research that shows the many negative health consequences of high sugar consumption. Moreover, the average American’s sugar intake surpasses evidence-based limits and recommendations set forth by the likes of the World Health Organization and the American Heart Association.

Again not surprisingly given its sponsors – including The Sugar Association – ASN came out harshly against the FDA’s proposal. Although the FDA mentioned the proposed updates to the Nutrition Facts label were meant to “help consumers make informed food choices and maintain healthy dietary practices” and deliver a greater understanding of nutrition science,²⁶ ASN vehemently argued against it. In a letter to the FDA commenting on various proposed revisions to the Nutrition Facts label, ASN wrote the following about added sugar labeling:²⁷

This topic is controversial and a lack of consensus remains in the scientific evidence on the health effects of added sugars alone versus sugars as a whole. There is also lack of evidence on the usefulness of a declaration of added sugars on the label to improve food choices and the health of consumers.

The topic is only “controversial” because the food industry is worried

that consumers are becoming more aware of the health effects of too much added sugar, and differentiating naturally occurring sugars from added ones may negatively impact sales of some of their products. Citing a “lack of evidence” on the adverse effects of added sugar is egregious, especially from an organization allegedly focused on nutrition research: “ASN also has concerns that the inclusion of added sugars on the label may divert attention away from total calories and other important contributors to weight gain.”

In contrast, ASN has never publicly stated it is against the breakdown of saturated and trans fats on the Nutrition Facts label, which is no different from the breakdown of naturally occurring vs. added sugars. Since the revised Nutrition Facts label is also slated to list total calories in larger font, concerns about diverted attention ring hollow: “The inclusion of added sugars on the label may confuse consumers and create the perception that naturally occurring sugars are somehow more beneficial because they are ‘natural’ and do not have health effects similar to added sugars.”

Fruit juice aside, naturally occurring sugars come bundled with nutrients, whereas added sugar only contributes calories, with zero nutrition. In that sense, naturally occurring sugars (consumed within whole foods) are more beneficial. This is basic nutrition science, and it is why eating an apple or peach is vastly different from eating candy. Not surprisingly, ASN sustaining partner The Sugar Association put out a press release in strong opposition

to added sugar labeling with similar talking points.²⁸

ASN's stance on processed foods and added sugar labeling demonstrates how its corporate ties can shape the organization's stances and public messaging, and unfortunately public policy.

Conflicted Spokepeople

ASN has a dozen spokepeople who are often tasked with speaking to media outlets looking for ASN's official stance on a particular issue.²⁹ Some of ASN's spokespeople's industry ties are troubling. For example, one is a spokesperson for the Institute of Food Technologists (IFT) and served

as Scientific Advisor for Nestlé USA for over 21 years.³⁰ Another, "reports personal fees from Coca-Cola, personal fees from McDonald's, grants from American Beverage Association, personal fees from Walt Disney Company, personal fees from General Mills, personal fees from Calorie Control Council, other from International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI), and other from Retrofit outside the submitted work."³¹ Yet another is listed as an 'expert' at Best Food Facts, a website created by food industry front group The Center for Food Integrity,³² and is a board member of ILSI and is on Cadbury Schweppes' Global Nutrition Advisory Panel.³³

CONCLUSION

While ASN is more of a research-based organization and less well-known than the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (AND), both organizations are deeply embedded with the food industry, and often communicate messaging that is industry-friendly. AND's "all foods fit" position paper – which explicitly states there are no "good" or "bad" foods – is paralleled by ASN's scientific statement on processed foods, which not only argues that both a washed apple and Lucky Charms are examples of processed foods, but goes one step further to defend highly processed foods as vessels for artificial ingredients that can lower sugar and caloric content.

Similarly, both organizations have a strong food industry presence at their annual conferences. This results in branded materials and communications, and, on a more subversive level, the underlying notion that food companies have the same interests and objectives in mind as health organizations. It is precisely because the food industry has vastly different goals from health organizations that these ties are so problematic. By ingratiating itself with nutrition organizations like ASN

and AND, the food industry can not only insert itself as being "part of the solution" but also address nutrition professionals in their environment and offer solutions that serve its bottom line and marketing strategies.

In order to bolster its credibility, reflect objective science that has the public's best interest in mind, and hold the food industry more accountable, it is paramount that ASN reconsider its financial ties to the junk food industry. Certainly its members, and the public, deserve better.

Food Politics author and New York University Professor Marion Nestle is a long-time member of ASN who is troubled by these conflicts. Here is why:

I think it's important that professional societies like ASN promote rigorous science and maintain the highest possible standards of scientific integrity. Research and education about food and nutrition are easily influenced by funding from food companies but such influence often goes unrecognized. This means that special efforts must be taken to avoid, account for, and counter food industry influence, and organizations like ASN should take the lead in doing so.

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