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## Fundación Española de Dietistas-Nutricionistas

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### CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

7 September 2016 | INTERVENTION AREA: EQUITY AND PROFESSIONAL ETHICS  
WITHIN THE DIETETIC PROFESSIONAL

ROUND TABLE: FOOD PRODUCTION AND GLOBAL HEALTH

Lecture Sequence: 1



#### Food industry conflicts of interest: Strategies of the Spanish food and drink industries to undermine public health

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Ultra-processed food and drink industries are one of the major drivers of the world epidemic of obesity and non-communicable diseases (NCDs), through the production, intensive marketing, and wide availability of energy dense nutritionally poor (EDNP) food and drinks (1). While fresh and perishable whole or minimally processed foods are healthier, most of the food and drink industries profits come from increasing consumption of EDNP products, making their interest irreconcilable with public health objectives (2). It is not surprising, then, that those industries deploy strategies to undermine public health policies and interventions aimed to reduce the consumption of EDNP products. I am going to outline the main strategies used, as described in the literature, and show how they are undermining the public health efforts to tackle the epidemic of obesity and NCDs in Spain.

The first strategy consist is to bias research findings. Although there is ample evidence of the association between sugar-sweetened beverages and obesity, the studies declaring conflicts of interest with the food industry are up to five times more likely to present a conclusion of no association (3). A complementary strategy is to divert the attention from the health effect of their products, emphasizing physical activity over diet and stating that there are no good or bad foods (4). A recent example in Spain is the consensus document about obesity and sedentarism in the 21st century, endorsed by national experts on nutrition, the executive director of the Spanish Food Security and Nutrition Agency, and representatives

of Coca-Cola Iberia, being the outcome of a workshop funded by that company in a luxurious environment (5).

The second strategy consist of influencing civil society thinking by questioning the legitimacy of government intervention, developing customers as soon as possible, and promoting a positive image of their companies. Noteworthy is the food and drink industries appeal to individual freedom and responsibility, claiming that legal restrictions regarding what one eats or sees on television are a sort of unjustifiable paternalism typical of the nanny state (6). Such kind of arguments have been used in Spain to avoid statutory regulations regarding food marketing of EDNP products directed to children and the presence of vending machines in schools, both aimed to develop customers since early childhood, a crucial period of personality development and acquisition of habits (7).

The third strategy is to co-opt public health professionals, trough financial support in many ways (funding professional organizations and foundations, sponsorship university full professorship positions, and so on), and to lobby public health officials and politicians to oppose statutory regulations (8). This undue influence is especially noteworthy in Spain, where the health authorities who implemented the Spanish strategy of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity Prevention (NAOS) endorsed in 2005 some of the arguments commonly put forward by these private corporations ("it is not about good or bad food") to justify and promote voluntary agreements with the food industry and self-regulation of food advertising targeted

at children and vending machines in schools (7). Some years later, the opinions of stakeholders regarding the impact of food marketing and its regulation policies on childhood obesity in Spain were analyzed (9). Whereas consumer, public health, and child and family advocates believed that there is a clear association between food marketing and childhood obesity, and that regulations are ineffective; advertising advocates, food manufactures and government representatives believed just the opposite. In spite of the scientific evidence supporting public health advocates views (10), it is noteworthy the government's alignment with advertising advocates and food manufactures. This is a clear indication that the food industry is still in the driver's seat of the country's food policy. Not surprising, bearing in mind that, at the time, the executive director of the Spanish Food Security and Nutrition Agency was the former Coca-Cola Iberia manager of scientific and normative affairs (11). As a consequence, the new Spanish code of co-regulation of food marketing to children, in breach of the WHO recommendations (12), ignores the frequency of exposure to or the nutritional quality of the products advertised, so that it is powerless to reduce children's exposure to EDNPs food and beverages. Furthermore, on restricting its application in audiovisual and printed media to children under the age of 12, it contravenes the provisions of the Food Safety & Nutrition Act which lays down that advertising directed to children up to 15 years of age should be regulated, by permitting, for example, that television food advertising targeted at children over the age of 12 may make use of well-known public celebrities who enjoy a high degree of popularity among the child audience (11).

In the opening address at the 8<sup>th</sup> Global Conference on Health Promotion, Margaret Chan, Director-General of the World Health Organization, reminded us that "efforts to prevent NCDs go against the business interests of powerful economic operators, including Big Food and Big Soda" (13). In view of WHO, as stated by Dr Chan, "the formulation of health policies must be protected from distortion by commercial or vested interests". If the states followed this advice from now on, it will be a giant step in the prevention and management of obesity and NCDs.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author states that there are no conflicts of interest in preparing the manuscript.

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