

Sugar's secret sweetener offer to health chiefs

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Industry hopes cash will influence anti-obesity drive

Jo Revill, health editor
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The sugar industry is planning to offer substantial sums of sponsorship money to the World Health Organisation as part of a secret attempt to influence the body's attempts to combat obesity worldwide.

The Observer has obtained a confidential briefing document outlining the sugar producers' new strategy for getting into the key meetings held in the WHO's Geneva headquarters.

The document was written by the British head of the World Sugar Research Organisation, which is wholly funded by sugar producers. It reveals the body's intention to offer a large amount of funding in order to be granted non-governmental organisation (NGO) status – something it has so far been denied.

But the document also shows how the organisation has analysed whether the key WHO officials are hostile to its interests, highlighting its desire to win over policymakers who will have a big influence on countries that are trying to improve their national diet.

The document has dismayed officials at WHO and food campaigners, who believe the industry is trying to subvert attempts to introduce policies aimed at reducing sugar levels.

After being shown the document, Professor Philip James – a world authority on food who drafted the first report warning of the threat of obesity back in 1990 and is now chair of the International Obesity Taskforce – said: 'This is a ruthless and vicious strategy to undermine the work being done around the world to enable people to have healthier diets.'

'Does the sugar industry really believe it can bribe the WHO? Has it come to this?'

Evidence is mounting that sugar is not only the cause of tooth decay, but also one of the major causes of obesity and heart disease. Nutritionists believe governments should be doing far more to warn the public of the dangers of foods which contain high sugar levels.

Earlier this year, the WHO produced its Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health, in the face of lobbying from food manufacturers and, in particular, countries with strong sugar interests. The industry managed to ensure that the strategy did not refer to an expert report, known as 916, which recommended that no more than 10 per cent of an adult's daily calorific intake should come from added sugar.

But, at the same time, Britain and France were instrumental in preventing the sugar lobby from being granted NGO status at the meetings, despite intense pressure from the United States and elsewhere. However, such opposition has not stopped its attempts.

A report prepared by Dr Richard Cottrell, director general of the WSRO and head of the Sugar Bureau in London, was written after an informal meeting this summer with Andre Prost, a WHO director with responsibility for liaising between his organisation and private industry.

'It is clear that WSRO will need to offer some form of collaboration with WHO, involving substantial sponsorship, to be considered for NGO status,' Cottrell writes. He adds: 'What is not clear is the extent of sponsorship expected and whether it will be possible to identify a project that would be acceptable to WHO but of direct value to the sugar industry.'

The document also names officials whom they believe to be blocking their way. 'It is also clear that certain individuals connected with Report 916 remain implacably hostile to the sugar industry, including [Derek] Yach.' Yach, a key figure in formulating the 916 report, has since left.

'Fortunately,' Cottrell continues, 'there does not now seem to be a defined group of anti-sugar staff within WHO.' However, Cottrell also suggests that the head of WHO, Lee Jong-Wook, may not be in place for too long. 'Dr Lee is apparently not inclined to allow WHO to become heavily involved in implementing any diet and health activities. He is himself under pressure, however, as a result of the poor performance of several of his senior appointees.'

The report illustrates the measures the industry is prepared to adopt to circumvent an international attempt to improve public health. The US Sugar Association questioned the validity of the 916 report at every stage, and even suggested to President Bush that he withdraw funding from WHO unless the 10 per cent recommendation was withdrawn.

It also emerged earlier this year that the US had submitted a 30–page report criticising the WHO for its lack of scientific evidence. 'Big sugar' gives millions of dollars to the Republican party, and to the the Bush campaign, and the President's administration argued that there was little robust evidence to show that eating too much sugar was a direct cause of obesity.

Leading scientists took up the cause shortly before the crucial World Health Assembly meeting in May, accusing the US of making the health of millions of young Americans 'a hostage to fortune' because they had failed to combat their own epidemic of a diet laden with fat and sugar.

But today's new document shows that the sugar battle is far from over and that the industry is intent on entering into the discussions.

Cottrell was yesterday determined to defend his position, despite the leaking of his own report. He said: 'We are not expecting [to have] undue influence; we simply want an opportunity to make our expertise available.'

But the report was met with astonishment at the WHO, which countered any suggestion that sponsorship money would win the industry a place at the discussion table.

Dr Catherine le Galles–Camus, assistant director of the department dealing with the global strategy, said: 'They know we are not keen to see some trade association being recognised as an NGO.'

'From the beginning, they [the sugar industry] have used these tactics. We do work with the private sector but only as far as it is committed to preventing disease.'

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