

And Now a Word From Our Sponsors

Australian Edition



Is the Dietitians Association of Australia in the Pocket of Big Food?

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INTRODUCTION

Just as most western nations do, Australia suffers significantly from diet-related chronic diseases. Heart disease is the leading cause of death, killing one Australian every 12 minutes.¹ Diabetes is also a serious health concern and has been on the rise in recent years, according to the Australian government.² Three out of five people who suffer from diabetes also suffer from heart disease. Especially troubling is how the indigenous population of Australia suffers from diabetes at three times the rate of the general population.³ Given these serious public health problems, all preventable through healthy eating, it behooves the nation's leading nutrition professionals to be honest with the Australian people.

The 2013 report, "And Now a Word from Our Sponsors," also from Eat Drink Politics, found that the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics in the United States has a serious credibility problem

due to its myriad conflicts with the junk food industry.⁴ For example, dietitians can earn continuing education credits from Coca-Cola and PepsiCo, and at their annual meeting, attend sponsored sessions by Nestlé and lobbyists for high fructose corn syrup. This sort of cozy relationship with the same companies that are contributing to the very problems dietitians are supposed to help prevent seriously undermines that profession's credibility.

Sadly, a very similar situation exists within Australia's dietetic profession. The Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA), representing more than 5,000 members, claims to be "the leader in nutrition for better food, better health and wellbeing for all."⁵ But that can't be true when the organization is compromised by serious conflicts of interest, which cast doubt on the organizations' dietary recommendations and policy positions.

CORPORATE SPONSORS

DAA's Partners Influence Nutrition Messages

The concept of “strategic philanthropy” was first honed by the tobacco industry, which curried favor with worthy causes to boost its reputation. The food industry has similarly sought to cover up its health-damaging practices through sponsorships of professional groups in exchange for positive PR. Here is how the U.S.-based Center for Science in the Public Interest describes such “philanthro-marketing” in relation to the soda industry:

To combat the growing public-health-perception crisis, leading soda producers have systematically cultivated financial partnerships with respected health and medical organizations. The companies use those relationships to foster “innocence by

association,” distracting the public from the industry’s multi-billion-dollar efforts to maximize sales of products that promote poor nutrition and obesity.⁶

Meat and Livestock Australia



Meat and Livestock Australia is a producer owned

company that provides marketing and research to the meat industry about the alleged health benefits of eating meat.⁷ In an especially troubling example of conflict of interest, DAA program partners directly support oversight and monitoring of important DAA initiatives. For example, Meat

DAA Corporate Partners include⁸



According to its 2013 annual report, DAA received \$661,000 from corporate sponsors in 2013, down slightly from \$700,000 in 2012.⁹ DAA depends on its corporate partners for roughly 15 percent of its annual budget,¹⁰ and sponsorship income is the third largest source of revenue after membership dues and conference fees.

and Livestock Australia is a sponsor of the DAA program, Australia's Healthy Weight Week. In helping consumers with "Understanding Food Packaging", the recommendations for eating healthier somehow do not include consuming less meat or any meat alternatives.¹¹

Also Healthy Weight Week,¹² promotes a free downloadable meat-centric recipe book. In the resource, dietitian Veronique Droulez opines, "Protein-rich foods, such as beef and lamb provide important nutrients necessary for good health."¹³ This is just one example of how DAA-endorsed materials, which purport to be written by objective scientific experts, instead serve as promotional material for sponsors who gain financially.

Nestlé



Corporate partners sponsored many DAA programs in 2014. For example, the Nestlé Nutrition Institute, in order to "build the next generation of nutrition researchers,"¹⁴ funds the DAA "Emerging Researcher Award." It's unlikely these awards are given to answer such pressing questions as: what would be the positive impact on Australian's health if Nestlé stopped marketing its candy and other sugary products to children? Nor would the Nestlé Nutrition Institute give money to study the superiority of breastfeeding over formula for infant health, given the company's financial stake in that market. The Australian press called out Nestlé's controversial role in promoting formula and undermining breastfeeding as recently as 2013¹⁵ and yet the DAA happily takes their money.

Nestlé proudly proclaims to be the biggest employer of dietitians in Australia. The company boasts it has worked with their dietitians to modify 70 percent of their portfolio to meet new nutritional criteria. However they fail to state what that new criteria is, beyond vaguely saying their new system, "assesses a product's nutritional contribution, considering its role in a balanced diet, its ingredients (including fat, added sugar, calcium and wholegrain) and the serving size usually consumed, either by adults or children."¹⁶

In the fall of 2014, DAA partnered with Nestlé in their "Nestlé Choose Wellness Roadshow", which traveled across six cities in Australia promoting allegedly healthy eating. The tour proudly proclaimed that, "Nestlé products are the ideal partners to help you invite more fresh food into your diet."¹⁷ These products include MILO (a chocolate milk mix) with 12g of sugar per serving¹⁸ (about 2.5 teaspoons) and Maggi noodles (similar to Top Ramen) with 880 mg of sodium per serving,¹⁹ more than one-half the daily "Suggested Dietary Target".²⁰

The 5 Star Health Rating is a government initiative that creates a labeling system for food products to help better inform consumers about what they're eating. The DAA and their corporate sponsor Nestlé both support this program; the DAA's logo appears on a flyer that Nestlé created to explain the program; this flyer is available for DAA members to download from the DAA website. Food companies can opt into the voluntary program. The Australian government

uses an algorithm to determine the ratings, measuring how much energy, saturate fat, sugars, sodium, protein, fiber, fruit, vegetables, nuts, and/or legumes is in each serving.²¹ Nestlé explains the exemptions for certain food products, such as candy, which according to Nestlé, have too small of package sizes for this rating system.²² How can DAA partner with a company whose marketing messages stand in direct contrast to the DAA mission and public health, such as:

- **“Don’t deprive yourself - banning your favorite foods such as cakes, pizza or beer will only make you crave them more. Instead cut down on treats to once or twice a week.”²³**
- **Defining health and wellness as: “Encouraging responsible nutrition and moderation and variety in food habits. There is no such thing as bad food.”²⁴**
- **A flagship product, Nesquik, which has 25g of sugar when served with milk.²⁵**
- **About its Kit Kats products: “Good to remember. In moderation chocolate can be enjoyed as part of a balanced diet and active lifestyle.”²⁶**

Dairy Australia



Through its Nutrition Program, Dairy Australia seeks to promote the evidence based health and nutritional benefits associated with dairy foods.²⁷ The Good Health Recipe Book by Dairy Australia is “independently reviewed” by the DAA, which intends the booklet be “given to you by your healthcare professional as one part of your overall care plan.”²⁸ The book includes the dubious nutrition advice that health needs are met by a variety of factors including, “enjoying milk, yogurt, cheese – preferably reduced-fat varieties...” The book also features dairy products that can “play an important role in the management of your weight, blood cholesterol, blood pressure, osteoporosis, and diabetes.”²⁹

Egg Nutrition Council



The Egg Nutrition Council claims to be an independent group of health and nutrition experts who provide unbiased and

Dairy Campaign Wins Dietitian DAA Award



At its annual meeting in May 2104, the DAA issued its President’s Award to Kim Tikellis, dietitian and nutrition manager at dairy giant Fonterra. According to DAA, she “won the award for the innovative campaign which has empowered 2,000 Fonterra employees around Australia to deliver healthy food messages to everybody, anywhere, everyday, especially in relation to the core dairy food group.”³⁰ Tikellis created a nutrition education campaign that, “grew employees’ knowledge of dairy so that all can be dairy advocates.” The DAA praised Tikellis’ campaign for its potential to increase dairy consumption in Australia. Perhaps it’s just a coincidence that Fonterra has been a DAA sponsor.³¹

accurate information to the Australian Egg Corporation Limited, on the nutritional and health qualities of eggs and “assist in overcoming the myths and confusion about egg consumption.”³²

Perhaps not coincidentally, the DAA website offers this twisted nutritional

logic: “Research shows eating eggs has only a small, insignificant effect on cholesterol levels so everybody should include them in their healthy eating plan.”³³ Even if this is true, the statement says nothing about eggs conferring a health benefit.

Sponsored Breakfast Seminars at 2014 DAA Conference³⁴



At the DAA conference, dietitians could learn about dietary cholesterol from the Egg Nutrition Council; Nestlé explained, “Unlocking the facts on kid’s snack habits;” and from Dairy Farmers, learn about statins and sterols. In addition, the Australian Food & Grocery Council presented on that group’s “Healthier Australia Commitment”, presumably showing off about how great their voluntary actions are to help Australians eat better.

DAA Lovin’ McDonald’s



In 2009, DAA held its annual conference in Darwin, Australia, where McDonald’s and the Australian Heart Foundation distributed a flyer to attendees, offering a voucher redeemable for a McDonald’s Deli Choices Wrap in exchange for visiting the Heart Foundation booth.³⁵ The flyer proclaimed the Wrap as Heart Foundation “Tick-approved” and that McDonald’s welcomed delegates to the 27th Annual DAA Conference. It’s unlikely, however, that the Heart Foundation (or the DAA) would offer its stamp of approval to the fast food king’s “Mega Mac”, the “classic Big Mac made even beefier with two extra patties” (for a total of four), which contains more than 41 grams of fat and 1230 mgs of salt.³⁶

CONFLICTS IN DAA SPOKEPEOPLE

DAA Spokesperson Program

The DAA Spokesperson Program supports 21 media trained dietitians around the country. DAA conducted surveys of journalists to gauge the “usefulness” of dietitian input. DAA issues an Excellence in Nutrition Journalism award at its annual meeting.³⁷ A section of the DAA website called “APDs in the Spotlight” showcases prominent dietitians working for industry. (APD is the equivalent of RD in the United States.) Here are two examples of conflicts of interest of DAA spokespeople. That DAA would choose dietitians who work for companies that promote highly processed foods containing harmful ingredients as spokespeople for the entire profession speaks volumes about how out of touch the organization is with public health.

Rebecca Boustead, APD

Director of Communications and Public Affairs, Kellogg's



The DAA highlights Boustead's role as a dietitian in the food industry making positive impact at Kellogg's. Boustead claims that the sodium reduction program, launch of foods

with more fiber, and shifts in Kellogg's advertising practices have, “made a real difference, while demonstrating economic value.”³⁸ She also expressed an interest in working with other organizations to reduce hunger and improve sustainability in the agriculture and food industry, without a clear link to how her team at Kellogg's intends to pursue that goal. Separately, the DAA promotes a breakfast program sponsored by Kellogg's.³⁹

By holding up Boustead as a shining example of the dietetic profession, the DAA is serving as mouthpiece of a company that makes millions of dollars selling such cereals as Froot Loops and “Frosties” (the Australian version of Frosted Flakes), while preying on young children's emotional vulnerabilities. That the DAA would provide a showcase for Kellogg's PR spin such as “foods with more fiber” is just more evidence of how low the DAA is willing to stoop to promote Big Food.

Ann Marie MacKintosh

Nutrition Manager for PepsiCo Australia



MacKintosh refers to her role as, “within a food company which is committed to innovating and reformulating food and beverage products, so that

healthier options are available to Australians,”⁴⁰ but offers no specific examples. This health-washing conveniently ignores how PepsiCo (the world’s second largest food company) makes most of its money selling the least healthy products. In addition to sugary beverages such as Pepsi, Mountain Dew, and Gatorade, the company also owns Smith’s – the largest snack food company in Australia, whose products include international brands such as Doritos and Cheetos, as well as Australian-bred wonders like Burger Rings, with the “big burger taste”. Perhaps MacKintosh was not consulted on the new product development for “Maxx”, a snack food that comes in such flavors as “Ultimate BBQ Ribs” and “Hot and Spicy Chicken Wings” and is packaged in “man-sized” bags.⁴¹

Conflicts in leadership

Leigh Reeve, DAA Director (board member) responsible for the DAA’s Conference Management, is also currently the Director of the Australian Breakfast Cereal Forum of the Australian Food and Grocers Council (AFGC).⁴² The AFGC’s stated goal is to ensure the long term success of the food and grocery sector.⁴³ Reeve was previously the DAA Communications and Marketing Manager who implemented the DAA corporate partnerships program.

The Australian Paradox?



Dr. Alan Barclay is another DAA spokesperson⁴⁴ with questionable ties. (Barclay lists DAA in his LinkedIn profile.⁴⁵)



The idea that Australians have been consuming less sugar

while obesity rates are on the rise was dubbed the Australian Paradox⁴⁶ in 2011 in a paper co-authored by Barclay. The questionable data was then used by the Australian Beverages Council to argue that health professionals should not call for a reduction in the consumption of sugar sweetened drinks. The soda lobby claimed that, “efforts to reduce sugar intake may not reduce the prevalence of obesity.”⁴⁷

Economist Rory Robertson began to publicly criticize the paper in 2012, which he called a “menace to public health.” Finally in February of 2014, one of the authors of the report Dr. Jennie Brand Miller admitted that some of the data might be inaccurate. According to one account of the controversy:⁴⁸

Robertson also alleges that the report is shadowed by undisclosed conflicts of interest. The university earns millions of dollars through its GI Foundation, which certifies sugary products as “Low-GI”. Dr. Alan Barclay and a former Coca Cola Australia director are both senior officers of the GI Foundation. Dr. Barclay also speaks at Coca Cola Australia seminars.⁴⁹

DAA POLICY

DAA Denies Influence

According to one account, when the DAA formed partnerships with Kellogg's, Unilever, Nestlé and other food manufacturers in 2005, some expressed concern that it would "affect the organization's ability to criticize the marketing of junk food to children and to take a strong stand on consumer-friendly food labelling."⁵⁰

Meanwhile the DAA defends its partnership program, pointing out that it's an opportunity for them to influence industry. But that influence is going in the other direction, and that's exactly why food corporations invest in these relationships.

DAA's CEO Clare Hewat says their binding legal contracts protect DAA's independence, but how can we know that is true without seeing these documents? "DAA can and does express its opinion without fear or favour and a review of our media releases, public comments and submissions bears that out," she said.⁵¹

DAA Corporate Sponsorship and Partnership Policy

According to DAA, the purpose of their "Corporate Sponsorship and Partnership" program is to increase revenue while offering a mutually beneficial arrangement that results in a "positive

or at least neutral impact on the food security and population health gain of Australians."⁵² Not exactly a high bar for an organization that purports to be "the leader in nutrition for better food, better health and wellbeing for all".

DAA lists the following benefits for corporate partnerships:⁵³

- **Credible, independent, expert partner for nutrition communications**
- **Unparalleled opportunity to inform the Australian public through members and the DAA profile**
- **Access to members and interest groups for advice**
- **Information and expert advice on all nutrition and health issues**
- **Opportunities to sponsor DAA programs**

The DAA does not have prohibitions against any types of food products being exhibited at their conferences, with the exception of breast milk substitutes. DAA advertising policies restrict false advertising (which is already illegal).

DAA says that corporate sponsors' joint activities must be consistent with the organization's nutrition principles but no details are offered in policy documents. To the contrary, in DAA's "Policy for Acceptance and Dissemination of Advertising," which includes trade shows, there is no mention of nutrition principles at all.⁵⁴ Also, the policy requires

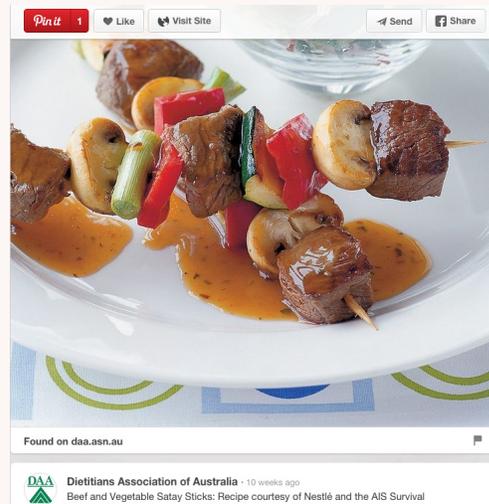
partnerships and sponsorships to be evaluated for relevance annually but the process is not stated.

Corporate partners provide the DAA with monetary or in-kind support for their various programs in exchange for “communication opportunities” (advertisements), access to national conferences, and an increased awareness of the corporate partner to members (more advertising).

DAA issues this advertising policy, perhaps to explain away the conflicts:

Advertising provides information and/or opportunities to members on a variety of products, services and activities. It is the responsibility of individual members or CPD registrants to evaluate information provided to them in whatever form and apply the information using their professional judgment, being fully aware that DAA does not endorse or otherwise agree with the information unless that is specifically stated. DAA encourages members to provide constructive feedback directly to external organisations.⁵⁵

Pictures speak louder than words?



DAA Pinterest post with recipe courtesy of Nestlé.

The DAA Endorsement policy requires that all endorsee’s products meet the “Australian dietary guidelines and health priorities for Australians or the DAA Vision and Mission.”⁵⁶ DAA says it refuses to endorse a specific branded commercial product or service. But the DAA’s policy on brand endorsement is contradicted numerous times, for example, on the DAA’s Pinterest pages, with recipes credited to companies such as Unilever, Campbell’s, and Nestlé that list branded products as ingredients.

WAS A DAA MEMBER PUSHED OUT OF HER PROFESSION FOR SPEAKING UP?

A special page on the DAA website lists only one name as being “not eligible” as a dietitian. DAA says Melanie Voevodin has been stripped of her earned credentials “due to an unresolved complaint and disciplinary process.”⁵⁷ According to Voevodin, the trouble started when she raised questions about potential conflicts of interest within DAA, when the earlier Eat Drink Politics report on the U.S. Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics was posted to a professional list-serve. In response, Voevodin says, the leadership of the DAA used an excuse to kick her out, and without due process. Most troubling is the “scarlet letter” nature of the web page, which according to Voevodin was put up suddenly, without any notice to her for a response. She said: “The most damning piece is how quickly DAA had my name up on the website, and, without notice to me in advance, and that there is nowhere in the policy and procedure to outline this naming on the website as a possible outcome.”⁵⁸ She added what changes she’d like to see:



The protracted public interest in food and its link to health means there is no better time to be a qualified dietitian. For the DAA as the self-proclaimed “leader in nutrition for better food, better health and wellbeing for all” there is an opportunity to be a powerful influence over Australia’s food supply. On the ground though, each individual dietitian bears the public scrutiny of the actions of the DAA and their continued financial relationships with the food industry and their front groups despite the evidence of conflicts. That conflict of interest exists whether real or perceived, whether denied, acknowledged or managed. As long as DAA maintains these financial relationships, every individual dietitian will bear the public scrutiny. It is therefore reasonable to suggest DAA is now the single greatest barrier to the credibility of the profession. At minimum, Australian dietitians need to be given the choice to be professionally registered with a body external to the DAA. Similarly accreditation of Australian University dietetic training needs to be completely separate from the DAA while the conflict of interest exists.⁵⁹

CONCLUSION

It's well known that the food industry's production and incessant marketing of unhealthy foods, especially to children, is at least partly to blame for poor eating habits. It's nearly impossible for "eat healthy" messages to compete with an industry that spends millions of dollars a year marketing the wrong kinds of foods.

Against this backdrop, we must ask: what is the role of the Dietitians Association of Australia—the nation's largest organization of nutrition professionals—in preventing or at least stemming the tide of diet-related health problems? What responsibility does

this influential group of dietitians bear to be a leading advocate for policy change to make eating healthfully more accessible? Does forming partnerships with the food industry compromise such a group's credibility? And what does the food industry gain from such partnerships? It's high time for this organization to look inward. The health of all Australians depends upon the independence of the nutrition profession and its leadership's ability to operate free of conflicts of interest and be the nutrition leaders they claim to be, free from sponsorship money.

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