

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, corporate sponsorship and the alternative: dietitians for professional integrity

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The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics ('the Academy'), founded in 1917, is the USA's largest organisation of nutrition professionals.¹ It represents >100 000 nutrition professionals, most of them registered dietitians (RDs).

The Academy's recent history of food industry ties has resulted in some members publishing 'statements of concern'.² These dietitian-penned accounts shed light on why some dietitians renounced their memberships. Many of these first-person pieces call for sponsorship reform and question whether the Academy's actions align with its mission ('a world where all people thrive through the transformative power of food and nutrition') and vision ('accelerate improvements in global health and well-being through food and nutrition').³

The purpose of this editorial is to highlight some facts that may surprise the BJSM reader. Over the past 25 years, the Academy entered into the following seven partnerships, sponsorships and agreements:

- ▶ In 1993, it teamed up with McDonald's to develop a line of Happy Meal toys.⁴
- ▶ Between 2001 and 2012, the Academy sponsors included Coca-Cola, ConAgra, General Mills, Kellogg and PepsiCo.⁵
- ▶ In 2007, the Academy promoted GlaxoSmithKline's (GSK's) Alli weight-loss pill at its annual conference (GSK had contributed \$10 000 to the Academy the prior year as a corporate sponsor).⁶
- ▶ In 2008, it unveiled the food industry's Smart Choices labelling programme at its annual conference (Smart Choices was deemed 'misleading and confusing for the general public' by the Food and Drug Administration soon thereafter).⁷

- ▶ In 2010, it partnered with the Hershey Center for Health and Nutrition on 'Moderation Nation'.⁸

- ▶ In 2013, it partnered with global animal pharmaceutical company Elanco to expand the already-existing Future of Food initiative, originally created in collaboration with the National Dairy Council.⁹

- ▶ In 2015, it partnered with Kraft Singles to have the Kids Eat Right Foundation logo on packages of the processed sliced cheese product.¹⁰

Some of the Academy's position papers employ an industry-friendly narrative. Its 'Total Diet Approach to Healthy Eating' position paper—drafted in 2013, retired on 31 December 2016 and reaffirmed to be updated, though 'still in effect' as of September 2017—states:

- ▶ 'All foods can fit ... if consumed in moderation with appropriate portion size and combined with physical activity.'
- ▶ 'Classification of specific foods as good or bad is overly simplistic and can foster unhealthy eating behaviors.'
- ▶ 'Focusing on variety, moderation, and proportionality in the context of a healthy lifestyle, rather than targeting specific nutrients or foods, can help reduce consumer confusion.'¹¹

These statements do not entirely align with nutrition research, which has shown that some foods (ie, fruits, vegetables, legumes) promote health, while others (ie, sugar-sweetened beverages, ultraprocessed¹² foods) pose health risks. Recent research does not support that an 'everything in moderation' approach leads to greater diet quality or better metabolic health.¹³

The narrative of moderation, 'all foods fit', and the inclusion of physical activity aligns very closely with statements from food corporations that have historical supported the Academy. For example,

- ▶ Coca-Cola: 'All of our products can be part of an active, healthy lifestyle that includes a sensible, balanced diet, proper hydration, and regular, physical activity.'¹⁴

- ▶ Kellogg: 'We also believe that all foods can have a place in the diet — with *balance* and *moderation*.'¹⁵
- ▶ McDonald's: 'Our goal is to provide you with the information you need to make sensible decisions about balance, variety, and moderation in your diet.'¹⁶
- ▶ Nestlé: '3 important keys to healthy eating are: Variety, *Balance* and *Moderation* [*sic*].'¹⁷

DIETITIANS FOR PROFESSIONAL INTEGRITY

Dietitians for Professional Integrity is a dietitian-organised grass-roots professional community that opposes The Academy's long-standing and consistent alignment with purveyors of highly processed, minimally nutritious foods and beverages. Created in February of 2013, the group has advocated for sponsorship reform within the Academy.

At formation, the Dietitians for Professional Integrity stated: 'The American Medical Association did not publicly acknowledge the harms of cigarette smoking until 1978, despite decades of research supporting that conclusion. Some doctors first raised concerns about their professional organisation's ties to tobacco companies as early as 1964. It was precisely this leadership and advocacy, combined with scientific evidence and public pressure, that brought about change.'¹⁸

Over the past 5 years, the Dietitians for Professional Integrity has helped lead the conversation on corporate sponsorships of health organisations among dietitians, facilitated advocacy efforts and applied public pressure to Academy leadership in the hopes of elevating the RD credential and increasing public trust and professional respect within the profession.

Funding The author has not declared a specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interests None declared.

Patient consent Not required.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

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To cite Bellatti A. *Br J Sports Med* Epub ahead of print: [please include Day Month Year]. doi:10.1136/bjsports-2017-098642

Br J Sports Med 2018;0:1–2.
doi:10.1136/bjsports-2017-098642

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