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The Fairy Tale About Soft Drink Nutrition Won't Sell

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As the federal government prepares to declare that soda pop can help make you fat, Coca-Cola's CEO, E. Neville Isdell, proclaims: "Carbonated soft drinks are going to be carriers of health and wellness benefits. We don't have it now, but we're looking into it."

Isdell knows no "it" will ever be found in a jug of sugar water. But with \$21 billion in 2003 revenues and \$4.3 billion in profits all built on the illusion of Coke being the real thing, he is taking Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale "The Emperor's New Clothes" to the next level. In the story, it is the king who is fooled by rogue weavers and cowering noblemen that he was wearing the finest in silk and gold thread in a public procession. In the end it was a little child who said, "But he has nothing on!"

In his own tale, it is Isdell who weaves a story. He recently announced that he will spend an additional \$350 million to \$400 million on top of more than \$2 billion the company already spends annually on advertising and marketing. "We have to make it easy for consumers to both enjoy and feel good about our products," Isdell said in a September conference call. "We need to effectively respond to some of the inaccuracies around the obesity debate."

To most doctors, there is little debate left. The US Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services are so convinced of the connection between soda and obesity that one of their conclusions in a draft of updated dietary guidelines is that a reduced intake of added sugars, "especially sugar-sweetened beverages," may help people control their weight.

But Isdell and the top lobbyists for soda, the American Beverage Association, attack every accurate scientific study in sight. When a study of 50,000 nurses published this summer in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* found that women who drank only one soda a day gained much more weight and increased their risk of getting diabetes by over 80 percent, the Beverage Association said, "It is scientifically indefensible to blame any one food or beverage." When a study this summer by researchers at the University of California at Davis connected fructose to obesity, the Beverage Association said the study was "not applicable" because it didn't factor in that drinks with fructose also have other sweeteners. When a paper was presented this spring at a digestive health medical conference that suggested a link between soda and a rare form of esophageal cancer, the Beverage Association called it "irresponsible and scientifically meritless." When researchers at Louisiana State and the University of North Carolina concluded that the use of high-fructose sweeteners over the last two decades correlates with the obesity epidemic, the association said the research was "without merit."

No science has merit to the soda industry. That is because they know that nothing is more irresponsible than pushing needless calories on kids now that we're finding out that obesity's costs. The Beverage Association brags that the nonalcoholic beverage industry is responsible for \$88.4 billion in US revenues, \$30 billion in business income taxes, \$14 billion in state taxes, and \$326 million in charitable contributions.

But the National Academies of Science say that adult obesity costs the nation between \$98 billion and \$129 billion in healthcare costs. The obesity healthcare costs for children tripled from \$35 million a year in 1979 to \$127 million a year in 1999. Not all of that is soda pop, of course, not in a devastating combination of soda, fast food, and sedentary lifestyles. The funniest thing about the soda industry's efforts to make everyone forget about sugar water is that they all stand up to point the finger for obesity at the lack of physical activity. The ABA says a balanced diet and daily exercise are the "blueprint" for reversing rising obesity rates.

Of course, if kids were truly outside and truly eating vegetables, they'd be spending a lot less time sitting in front of televisions munching chips and being further bombarded by ads for trash. The National Academies estimate that the food and beverage industries spend up to \$12 billion a year marketing to kids, an amount nearly equal to what the nation is spending on No Child Left Behind.

In Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale, it is a child who exposes the lie. For the emperor of empty calories, parents, schools, and perhaps the government will have to step in against the effort to convince us that the jugs of sugar water at the supermarket are "carriers of health and wellness benefits."

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