

CSPI: Perception vs. Scientific Credentials

By ACSH Staff — October 20, 2003

An open letter to Center for Science in the Public Interest director Michael Jacobson:

The random mixing of science, politics, agendas, and self-aggrandizing when used against individuals who don't happen to endorse your opinions is a sad commentary on CSPI. Your media event criticizing the USDA-HHS Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee is another example of the myopic vision and irrational knee-jerk judgmentalism expected from CSPI.

Unhappy with seven of the thirteen appointees, CSPI proceeded to publicly question their suitability through character assassination. These top-ranked, highly-regarded, well-published, nationally and internationally recognized leaders sinned in your eyes because they had the audacity to accept research grants or advisory panel positions or sponsored lectureships from or simply talked to members of the FOOD INDUSTRY! Guilt by association at its worst.

You expressed concern not because these professionals fail to be in the top tier of research scientists, educators, mentors, and leaders but because they are open-minded and associate with CORPORATIONS! In your Oh-my-God-how-dare-you! letter to USDA and comments to the media you indicated, with the usual lack of wit and charm, that these individuals had substantial funding from the sugar, egg, chocolate, dairy, and other food-related industries, and that the chosen experts' "biases" should disqualify them since "Few people, after all, want to bite the hands that feed them." A conflicted comment after the one made at the CSPI conference called *Conflicted Science: Corporate Influence on Scientific Research and Science-Based Policy*, which noted: "We do not contend that industry-sponsored research is always bad science, or that companies should be prohibited from providing input to government agencies." Thanks, Mike, for allowing "bad" corporations to fund research and provide input to government but it appears that when we do, it comes back to haunt anyone involved.

You left out a few key points, Mike. Let me tell you what fifteen minutes with Google and Pub-Med reveals about these "biased" and unacceptable people. (And, in the interests of full disclosure: I consider many of them colleagues and friends. And none of them has received "substantial funding" or has a grant from the egg industry, with which I am associated.)

CSPI: "Fergus M. Clydesdale, professor at the University of Massachusetts, has held stock in and consulted for several food-related companies."

Dr. Clydesdale is Distinguished Professor and Head of the Department of Food Science, University of Massachusetts Amherst. He is an expert on food policy, author of over 360 scientific articles, and co-author/co-editor of twenty books. He has served on the Keystone Committee on National Policy on Diet and Health, the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Academy of Sciences, and the FDA Food Advisory Committee. He received the Institute of Food Technologists'

highest honor, University of Massachusetts' Distinguished Teaching Award, and CAST's Charles A. Black Award for scientific communication. (Maybe there is a *reason* food companies want to consult with him.)

CSPI: "Vay Liang, professor at the University of California at Los Angeles, has received funding from numerous drug companies."

WHAT CSPI DIDN'T SAY: Vay Liang W. Go, M.D. is Professor of Medicine at the UCLA School of Medicine; Director, UCLA Nutrition Education Program; Associate Director, NIH/UCLA Clinical Nutrition Research Unit; Founder and Past President of the American Pancreatic Association; Editor-in-Chief of *Pancreas*; Member of the FDA Advisory Committee on Gastrointestinal Drugs; and Chairman of the Research Program Evaluation Committee for the American Institute of Cancer Research. Awards include the Research Achievement Award from the American Institute of Cancer Research, Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Pancreatic Association, and the Mayo Foundation Distinguished Alumni Award. He has published 320 original papers and 117 book chapters, written reviews and editorials, and co-edited *Nutritional Oncology*. (And Mike, did you know that there are researchers testing for effective drug treatments of pancreatic cancer?)

CSPI: "Penny Kris-Etherton, professor at Pennsylvania State University, has consulted for Campbell Soup and Procter & Gamble."

WHAT CSPI DIDN'T SAY: Penny M. Kris-Etherton, Ph.D., R.D. is Distinguished Professor of Nutrition at Pennsylvania State University. Dr. Kris-Etherton's research focuses on the nutritional regulation of lipoprotein metabolism and has generated many significant contributions to understanding how exercise, smoking, weight loss, and diet affect blood lipids and cardiovascular health. She has served on the AHA Nutrition Committee and the IOM-NAS Macronutrient Committee. A check of Pub-Med lists 128 peer-reviewed articles dealing with diet and lipids. (And yes, Mike, because she is an expert on diet and lipids, the egg industry has occasionally talked to Dr. Kris-Etherton, who I've personally known and respected for many years.)

CSPI: "Theresa Nicklas, professor at Baylor College, has conducted research funded by the Sugar Association and the Kellogg Company."

WHAT CSPI DIDN'T SAY: Theresa A. Nicklas, DrPH, LN is Professor of Pediatrics at Baylor College of Medicine with research on factors influencing eating patterns in childhood, how eating patterns relate to obesity and type 2 diabetes, and intervention strategies for maintaining healthful behavior. Her CSPI-determined sin? She had the nerve to say, "The majority of the studies available looking at the relationship between obesity and sugar consumption are negative." And how could she say this? Probably based on her eighty-plus publications on diet and health in children. The Bogalusa Heart Study was a gold mine for collecting and analyzing data to test a hypothesis. (You do remember data analysis from your doctoral studies, don't you Mike?)

CSPI: "Russell Pate, professor at the University of South Carolina, has received at least \$200,000 from industry-funded International Life Sciences Institute."

WHAT CSPI DIDN'T SAY: Russell R. Pate, Ph.D. is Professor in the Department of Exercise Science at the University of South Carolina, Columbia. He studies physical activity in the

prevention of obesity. And that nasty funding from ILSI? A fellowship program to facilitate linkages between the school and community to promote physical activity in children. Dr. Pate's "substantial" funding comes from government: NIH/NHLBI, for a six-year Trial of Activity for Adolescent Girls (\$4,075,000) and a three-year Promotion of Physical Activity in High School Girls (\$1,981,000). So Mike, is he going to forfeit credibility for fellowship support despite getting a few million from NIH? (What was that about the "hand that feeds them," Mike?)

CSPI: "Xavier Pi-Sunyer, professor at Columbia University, has been a paid consultant or advisor to numerous drug companies and received research support from Campbell Soup and Warner-Lambert."

WHAT CSPI DIDN'T SAY: F. Xavier Pi-Sunyer, M.D. is Director of the New York Obesity Research Center at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital. Dr. Pi-Sunyer has served as President of the American Society for Clinical Nutrition, President of the American Diabetes Association, President of the North American Association for the Study of Obesity, Chairman of the NHLBI Task Force on the Treatment of Obesity, and member of the WHO International Obesity Task Force and served on the NIDDK Task Force on The Prevention and Treatment of Obesity. He has published 173 articles on obesity, diabetes, and nutrition and written eighty-two book chapters and edited two books. (Unfathomable why the food industry would have any interest in what he has to say about nutrition and health.)

CSPI: "Connie M. Weaver, professor at Purdue University, has conducted research for the National Dairy Council, National Dairy Board, and Procter & Gamble."

WHAT CSPI DIDN'T SAY: Connie M. Weaver, Ph.D. is Distinguished Professor and Head of the Department of Foods and Nutrition at Purdue University. She received the Atwater Lecturership award from Agricultural Research Service, USDA, and American Society for Nutritional Sciences. She has served as Chair of the Nutrition Study Section NIH, on the Board of Trustees for the ILSI, and as an Advisory Council Member for the Joint Institute for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition. A quick peek at Pub-Med gets eighty-nine papers. Dr. Weaver's research has focused for many years on calcium metabolism (of some interest to the dairy industry).

But Mike, please, at least be consistent. You failed to note that _the CSPI-recommended appointee_ has received research dollars from Abbott Laboratories, AstraZeneca Pharmaceuticals, Aventis Pharmaceuticals, Boehringer Ingelheim Pharmaceuticals Inc., ClinTrials Research, Dey Laboratories, GlaxoSmithKline, Glaxo Wellcome Inc., Merck Research Laboratories, Monaghan Medical Corp., Schering/Key Pharmaceuticals, Sepracor Inc., and SmithKline Beecham Pharmaceuticals. Now, I have no problem with this but then again, I don't live on the lofty moral high ground you do.

And what does the real scientific community say about these individuals whose credibility and objectivity you question? FANSA (Food and Nutrition Science Alliance), with over 100,000 food nutrition and medical practitioners and scientists, wrote regarding the committee members that "As their professional stature in the nutrition, scientific, and academic communities attest, their collective expertise and perspective will well serve the public in the formulation of critical dietary advice." But then what can a bunch of scientists (who no doubt feed at the corporate trough) know

about stature and expertise? Clearly the world needs you to be the judge of credibility and professionalism. But Mike, what is the evidence for these so-called "biases" that make them unqualified to serve? Show me the data!

So a little research provides a fuller picture of the character of these appointees than CSPI reported. I will admit that I take your defamation of their credibility and professionalism personally because I've been on both sides of the issue as a researcher trying to support a program and as a grants administrator trying to get the best research accomplished (amidst CSPI-generated concerns about "industry-funded" studies). And I should note that in the past, CSPI has had its go at eggs and at my reputation and credibility. My own conflicts of interest: I've had grants from anyone who'd fund me (meat, milk, eggs, NIH, USDA, AHA, foundations and even family, if they had offered) as long as they honored my professionalism. I served on advisory panels for everything from eggs to avocados. But the studies were mine, the data were mine, the analysis and interpretation of the data were mine, and what I wrote was mine. No one told me what to think or say or do. I've trained ten Ph.D. and three M.S. students; published ninety-two peer-reviewed papers, twenty-six book chapters, and thirteen symposium proceedings; and served on a variety of panels and committees. Today I am proud to be funded by the egg industry, using science and facts to correct the damage done by you and your paternalistic colleagues who would ban eggs along with almost everything else.

So tell me, Mike, what new knowledge have you generated from original research? Who of the next generation of scientists have you mentored? How many students have you taught? How much service and leadership have you provided to your profession? You try to negate the honor and reputation of those you don't even attempt to know professionally. They are just media fodder for the CSPI donation machine. They are unacceptable because they do not fall into lock-step with your dogmatic beliefs, because they do not succumb to your media-hyped scare tactics, and because they do not suffer fools described as "proud about finding something wrong with practically everything." (*Washingtonian* magazine, February 1994). (Reminds me of the TV ad: "Give it to Mikey, he hates everything.") Well, you clearly raised bogus concerns and bogus questions, with media-hyped charges of bias and conflict of interest directed at the best members of the scientific community, who are serving their profession and the public. But then again, those of us who take science and facts seriously understand why you do what you do. To paraphrase an old saying, "Those who can, do. Those who can't bitch about those who can."

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