Sugar is [the d]evil in sour article

By ACSH Staff — April 14, 2011

Given the current trends in health media, it seems that anyone can say anything is toxic these days. Such is the case with the lengthy piece [1] in yesterday’s The New York Times by Gary Taubes that describes the anti-sugar lecture, “Sugar: The Bitter Truth” by Robert Lustig, professor of pediatrics at the University of California, San Francisco. The 90-minute lecture [2], which can be found on YouTube, has gone viral since its July 2009 debut. Throughout the video, Dr. Lustig labels sugar in all its forms as “toxic,” “poison” and just plain “evil,” all the while claiming that its consumption can be linked to ailments from heart attacks and metabolic syndrome to “malignant cancer” (“As if there were any other kind,” gibes Dr. Ross).

“You may as well insert a blank for sugar,” quips ACSH’s Dr. Elizabeth Whelan, referring to the NYT article title “Is Sugar Toxic?” “And where is the science to support it? Well, regardless of the wealth of verbiage replete with science-y terminology, it simply isn’t there.”

Despite the abundance of contradictory evidence from well-regarded sources, such as the Institute of Medicine that Mr. Taubes presents in his article, he still buys into Dr. Lustig’s “persuasive case.”

“Where to begin,” ponders ACSH’s Dr. Gilbert Ross. “Laypeople will read this and think, ‘Wow, this guy sure knows his carbohydrate metabolism, this stuff is terrible, I can’t eat high fructose corn syrup (HFCS), or sugar or...anything!’ Taubes’ convoluted arguments use words that appear to make sense, but aren’t backed by even the most basic principles of medicine. For instance, he claims that HFCS must go through the liver, unlike glucose, and therefore takes its toll on the organ, and ultimately your health. Yet you can lose half of your liver, and still be fine. Just about everything you eat goes through your liver. It is well-equipped to handle a huge variety of substances. He also assumes that what happens in rodents must also happen in humans. When confronted with opposing arguments that don’t support his claims, Taubes still maintains that this doesn’t mean his evidence is wrong. The steps he’s climbing are made of sand — he’s basically presenting assumptions as facts, and they are all based upon poor or no science.”