

Ways & Means Transcript—S1E4—Sugar Fix

Emily Hanford (EH): From Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy, this is Ways and Means. We spotlight bright ideas for how to improve human society. I'm Emily Hanford.

Female Singer: How mild? How mild? How mild can a cigarette be? Take the Camel 30-Day Test and you'll see...

EH: In December, 1953, the CEOs of the major tobacco companies met secretly in New York City. They needed to figure out what to do about plummeting sales. Studies were linking smoking to lung cancer. Reader's Digest had published an article titled "Cancer by the Carton" and cigarette sales took a nosedive. So, the industry worked with a big PR firm and wrote something called "A Frank Statement to Cigarette-Smokers". They paid to have it published in 448 newspapers. The statement, which was signed by the nation's top tobacco executives assured Americans that "We accept an interest in people's health as a basic responsibility paramount to every other consideration in our business." Kelly Brownell, the Dean of the Sanford School, calls that statement -

Kelly Brownell (KB): The first step in a concerted half-century long campaign to mislead Americans about the catastrophic effects of smoking, and to avoid public policies that might damage sales.

EH: Coming up on this episode of Ways and Means: how lessons learned in the Tobacco Wars are guiding a new public health fight: the battle against sugar in our food.

KB: Sugar acts on the brain very much like classic substances of abuse.

EH: Kelly Brownell has thought deeply about how government policies affect the food choices Americans make.

KB: There are now a number of studies using lab animals and using human brain-imaging techniques showing that sugar activates the same brain reward pathways that get activated by cocaine, alcohol, nicotine, and other substances of abuse.

EH: Kelly and many others in the field says sugar can act on our brains like a drug. And, while no one would say sugar has as powerful an effect as tobacco or cocaine, it does have a similar effect deep inside our brains.

KB: And it means that people can crave the substances, including sugar, when they've been accustomed to taking it and stop.

EH: They can have withdrawal symptoms.

KB: They can perhaps even develop tolerance, where they need to have more of the substance over time in order to produce the same pharmacologic effects.

EH: The World Health Organization says Americans consume more than twice as much sugar as they should. And, often, it's hidden. 70% of our food, even staples like bread and ketchup, have added sweeteners. Advocates for healthy food have proposed attacks. It's a strategy that's helped America in the ongoing effort to kick the cigarette habit. As cigarette taxes were imposed and cigarettes became

more expensive, Americans bought fewer packs. Of course, the Big Food manufacturers- we'll call them Big Food- they don't want a sugar tax. They fear it will affect their bottom line. If a soda is more expensive, some people will choose to drink water instead. This Big Food fight- it's actually very similar to the fight over tobacco, and the strategies in both fights, even some of the players, are exactly the same. A few years ago, Kelly Brownell co-wrote a paper called "The Perils of Ignoring History: Big Tobacco Played Dirty, and Millions Died". How similar is Big Food? He and a co-author analyzed historical evidence pertaining to tobacco industry practices and messages and strategies used to influence public opinion. They also looked at food industry practices, messages, and strategies used to influence public opinion. They looked at legislation and regulation, litigation in the conduct of scientists. Kelly's research shows early on the tobacco industry had something he calls a "playbook." It included a detailed script that directed how industry executives, lobbyists, lawyers, even scientists and government officials friendly to the industry. It told them how to behave, it told them what to say. One former FDA Commissioner, David Kessler, said the script went like this, "Repeat over and over again that smoking had not been proven to cause cancer, not proven, not proven, not proven. This would be stated insistently and repeatedly," Kessler wrote in his book, "A Question of Intent". "The idea was to inject a wedge of doubt in the public's mind. It was a simple plan and it worked," Kessler wrote in his book.

Ken Warner (KW): It's not unlike a political candidate, who has a team of people saying, 'This is how you should respond to the following questions and be consistent.'

EH: This is Ken Warner.

KW: My official title is very lengthy: Avedis Donabedian Distinguished University Professor of Public Health at the University of Michigan.

EH: Ken knows as much as anyone about the tactics of Big Tobacco.

KW: I've been doing tobacco policy research for four decades, at this point. I have an economics background, so much of what I've done, although not all of it is economics aspects of tobacco policy.

EH: Ken Warner co-wrote that paper with Kelly Brownell. He was not at all surprised when their research showed that tobacco companies were making a big effort to influence public opinion, and he sees direct similarities with Big Food.

KW: Well, it's interesting to read what Kelly calls the "playbook" of the Big Food industries and, it's really industries (plural), in the case of food. And to see the similarities of strategies to deflect concerns about what the products are doing to the health of the public, to try and change this from a discussion about the responsibility of industry and society, to focus it on- narrowly- on the desires and responsibilities of individual consumers.

EH: Here's what he's talking about: at one shareholders' meeting of cigarette and food manufacturer, RJR Nabisco, a woman asked company chairman Charles Harper whether he would want people smoking around his children and grandchildren. Harper responded, "If the children don't like to be in a smoky room, they'll leave." "But, an infant cannot leave a room," said the woman and Harper answered, "At some point, they learned to crawl, okay? And then they begin to walk." As if a little kid would take personal responsibility and walk out of the room on their own. Big food also touts personal responsibility as the way to combat the nation's obesity problem. For example, in August 2002, a bunch of lawyers representing overweight children filed a class-action lawsuit against McDonald's. The lawyers

argued McDonald's engaged in deceptive advertising sales and promotion directed at children, and the lawyer said McDonald's knew its actions and its food would lead to obesity and other health complications for millions of kids. Soon after, the US House of Representatives approved a bill banning lawsuits of this kind, ones brought by obese customers who say they became obese by eating at fast food restaurants. Here's what House Majority Leader Tom DeLay said at the time, "It's hard to believe that trial lawyers want to make the claim that 'Ronald McDonald made me do it'. The point of this debate is all about personal responsibility. If you eat too much, you will gain weight." The president of the National Restaurant Association, when asked about the role of restaurants in contributing to the obesity problem, said this, "Just because we have electricity doesn't mean you have to electrocute yourself." US District Judge Robert Sweet dismissed the McDonald's lawsuit in 2003. Meanwhile, although Congress hasn't passed a law banning such lawsuits, many states have. Kelly Brownell says there's actually a reason his research shows a strategic connection between Big Tobacco and Big Food.

KB: There was a time when some of the Big Food companies were owned by the tobacco companies, and then when they split apart, like RJR Nabisco. RJR Reynolds, the tobacco company, owned Nabisco at one point, and there are other examples of that. So, when those companies split apart, the food companies ended up using some of the same law firms, public relations firms, and their trade associations tended to behave very much like the tobacco trade association.

EH: Here's another example of how research shows the tobacco and food fights have paralleled one another: the effort to attract new customers. Over the decades, as tobacco sales fell in the U.S., tobacco manufacturers looked to the developing world.

KW: They're a natural target.

EH: This is Ken Warner, again, from the University of Michigan. He says, "Take India, for example."

KW: A lot of those people are consuming bidis, which are just little hand-rolled cigarettes, kind of similar to marijuana joints, and the industry assumes that as these people become more affluent, they will turn to buying cigarettes.

EH: Same with sugar, as more Americans are beginning to understand that sugar is routinely added to food and beverages. Kelly Brownell says many brands are marketing aggressively in the developing world.

KB: They call these "emerging markets", but that could be considered a euphemism for "developing" or the most vulnerable countries. And the companies will have to be held accountable, I think, for their marketing practices in these countries.

Sajiv Panditha (SP): A Sri Lankan breakfast. Oh, it could be a lot of things, but everybody has their nice cup of ceylon tea, something Sri Lanka is famous for around the world.

EH: This is Sajiv Panditha. He works in Sri Lanka's capital, Colombo. He talked to us on Skype, and because of that it's a little hard to hear him, but it's worth listening to his description of how Sri Lankans are consuming sugar.

SP: Sri Lanka, Sri Lankans, rather, I mean we have a sweet tooth. We just love our sugar. You should try a tea in Sri Lanka. It's almost a tradition to just keep adding sugar to, especially our tea. I mean, honestly,

for me, Sri Lankan tea has always been sweet and, as especially, ceylon tea is not meant to be drunk that way, but we love- we love our sweetness.

EH: Late last year, the World Health Organization said the amount of sugar Sri Lankans consume is at a dangerous level. The average Sri Lankan eats three times more sugar in a day than what's recommended. They are already drinking lots of tea with sugar, and things are changing. Fast food restaurants are opening with menus that include lots of sugar. 10% of the people in Sri Lanka have already been diagnosed with diabetes, and the number is rising. So, the local diabetes association went on the offensive. They decided to tell Sri Lankans too much sugar is dangerous. Sajiv works at the ad agency the local Diabetes Association called "Saatchi and Saatchi."

SP: So, they said, "Okay, look now, Sri Lankans love their sugar, but you need to make people believe that it's actually bad for you. We need to convince them that they need to cut down their intake and basically convince a sugar-loving nation." That's-how do you convince a sugar-loving nation that something you love so dearly is actually bad for you?

EH: Sajiv and his colleagues did some research, and pretty quickly decided to use the tobacco story to help people understand the dangers of too much sugar.

SP: So, the alarming reality was that tobacco kills someone every six seconds, and diabetes does the same thing. And we realized, "Okay, now, tobacco is generally perceived as something bad." From there, that was our core idea.

EH: Problem was, three languages are spoken in the country, so whatever message they sent, it had to be visual.

SP: So, we created what we call the "Sugarette", which is essentially a cigarette made out of brown and white sugar.

EH: The sugarette is a picture of a cigarette, and only if you look really closely do you notice it's made up of sugar crystals; brown sugar for the filter, white for the cigarette. And here's what the ad says: on one side, the text reads,

Male Narrator (MN): Tobacco is highly addictive. You love the way it makes you feel. The satisfaction it gives- you crave it. You needed to get through the day. It stimulates an integral part of your brain. It silently narrows your blood vessels, leading to more complications like heart disease and stroke. Somewhere in the world, it takes a life every six seconds.

EH: On the other side of the page, still underneath the image of the sugarette, the text reads,

MN: Sugar is highly addictive. You love the way it makes you feel. The satisfaction it gives- you crave it.

EH: The copy is the very same. Narrows blood vessels, leads to heart disease and stroke, and somewhere in the world it takes a life every six seconds. A few months after the campaign, the government of Sri Lanka announced it would start printing color-coded labels to indicate just how much sugar a drink contains. Advertising can be a powerful tool for either side of a debate, so can public policy. In the U.S. About 42% of the cost of a pack of cigarettes is taxes.

KW: Well, taxing cigarettes has been demonstrated for decades now to be one of the most effective policy measures to reduce smoking.

EH: This is tobacco policy expert, Ken Warner, again.

KW: There's a universal law of demand that says if you raise the price, people are going to demand less of it, and it applies to all products, including addictive substances like nicotine and tobacco-

EH: And foods with added sugar, too.

KW: If you want to reduce the consumption of certain kinds of foods relative to others, you should raise their prices and you can do that through snack taxes, sugar-sweetened taxes for drinks, beverages. That will work. We know it will work.

EH: Some communities are beginning to experiment with taxes on soda. Here's health policy expert Kelly Brownell, again.

KB: The first tax large enough to drive down consumption, was passed a little bit more than a year ago in Berkeley, California. And now that's been studied and the results have been really quite positive. The soda consumption has gone down, and revenue has picked up for the city, and the City of Berkeley has used this to devote to other public health related causes. So, it's really been a win-win.

EH: Some people say Berkeley isn't a good example. The town has a reputation for being liberal. Some have called it an outlier.

KB: I think Berkeley is much more of a forecaster than an outlier. A lot of public health measures like making sidewalks accessible for wheelchairs, putting taxes on tobacco, and having Clean Indoor Air laws where you can't smoke inside began in places in Berkeley or places like Berkeley. So, I think it's just a sign of the times and sign of what will come. And the taxes are now being considered in many places around the country-

EH: And around the globe, as well. Mexico recently implemented a sugar tax- and as a result, consumption of sugary beverages has declined by 12%.

KB: Some people challenge the parallels between tobacco and food and very often they'll say things like, "You don't have to smoke but you have to eat." And we certainly don't want the food companies to go out of business, because we would all die, because there be no food, and certainly that's true, but there are some similarities especially in the behavior of the company and there's a lot to be learned from the war on tobacco, because it created tremendous public health benefit and some of those lessons can apply very nicely. So, for example, protecting children. You know, getting rid of junk foods in schools and not allowing cigarette marketing to kids. Those things make sense. Pushing up the price of tobacco so people buy it less made a huge public health difference. So, why can't those models be considered for food? And more and more people are seeing that and those are exactly the public health approaches that are being adopted.

EH: Ways and Means is produced by Carol Jackson, Alison Jones, and Karen Kemp. Our assistant producer is Susannah Roberson. We're a production of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, and we thank you for listening. We'll have a link to the study Kelly Brownell referred to; it's

called "The Perils of Ignoring History: How Big Tobacco Played Dirty and Millions Died, How Similar is Big Food?" We'll also link to that Sri Lankan ad. That's all at our website, waysandmeansshow.org. And a special thanks to Duke student Yemi Adewuyi for being the voice of the Sugarette advertisement. If you like what you're hearing, would you leave a review at iTunes? It will really help a lot. Until next time, I'm Emily Hanford.

Voice of Fred Flinstone: Winston tastes good, like a cigarette should!

Male announcer: The Flinstones has been brought to you by Winston, America's best-selling, best-tasting filtered cigarette!

Voice of Fred Flinstone: Winston tastes good, like a cigarette should!