



Disgust at claims sugar as dangerous as alcohol

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SCIENCE WRITER

EXPERTS have taken aim at claims by US researchers that sugar is as dangerous as alcohol and should be tightly regulated by governments.

Dietitians, nutritionists and health policy advocates contacted by *The Australian* all condemned the claims published today by the journal *Nature* by University of California endocrinologist Robert Lustig and his UCSF colleagues as factually incorrect and sensationalist.

In their commentary, Professor Lustig's group states that sugar consumption is linked to a rise in non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and hypertension, its effects on the body are similar to alcohol and that it has "dependence-producing properties" with the "clear potential for abuse".

The team calls for regulatory measures such as taxation, advertising bans and age restrictions on the purchase of products with added sugar.

"These simple measures... are now taken for granted as essential tools for our public health and wellbeing. It's time to turn our attention to sugar," they wrote.

"I'm disgusted that *Nature* would publish this," said Sydney University nutritionist Jennie

Brand-Miller. "Because it's published in *Nature* people will assume it has validity and some basis in science.

"How you can equate sugar which occurs naturally in apples with alcohol beggars belief."

Health policy advocate Jane Martin, with the Melbourne-based Obesity Policy Coalition, said the research "muddies the waters". "I'm not a scientist or dietitian but I don't think the evidence is clear that sugar per se is a problem."

According to Melbourne clinician and nutrition researcher Peter Clifton, she is correct.

Professor Clifton said Professor Lustig's claims were not based on hard science.

"Sugar is just another form of calories, easily available and very palatable but no more metabolically deadly than starch or fat calories and certain not equivalent to alcohol," said Professor Clifton, who is head of nutritional interventions at Baker IDI Heart and Diabetes Institute.

The Dietitians Association of Australia said there was no evidence sugar was the cause of the worldwide obesity epidemic and related health problems.

"When it comes to reporting on nutrition, DAA has heard many sensationalist stories," it said. "Not unlike fad diets, these reports often appear cyclically like the proverbial bad penny."