



War over sweet nothings

Experts claim sugar has been demonised in a leading journal

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AS far as Jennie Brand-Miller is concerned the editors of Britain's journal *Nature* are in deep trouble. They published an opinion piece about the dangers of sugar that she claims goes beyond controversial.

"I'm disgusted that *Nature* would publish this," says Brand-Miller, a nutritionist at the University of Sydney and pioneer of the glycemic index, a measure of the effects of carbohydrates on blood sugar levels.

The commentary in question was written by paediatric endocrinologist Robert Lustig and two colleagues at the University of California, San Francisco. In a nutshell they argue that sugar — specifically fructose or fruit sugar — is toxic, as dangerous to health as alcohol, and should be regulated by governments.

"As dangerous as alcohol? Hopefully, there'll be a concerted backlash to all this nonsense," Brand-Miller says with obvious frustration.

She's not alone. Weekend Health was unable to find a single dietitian, nutritionist, advocacy group, researcher or government

agency that supported Lustig's argument. Instead, they said his commentary was inaccurate and, with the imprimatur of *Nature*, potentially highly misleading.

"This just muddies the waters," says Jane Martin, senior policy adviser with Victoria's Obesity Policy Coalition. "Sugar is not so toxic," says the Dietitians Association of Australia. "This is an opinion piece. It's not referred. Its purpose is to raise issues potentially contentious in public debate," says Louise Sylvan, chief executive of the Australian National Preventive Health Agency.

And there's plenty of that. As Sylvan notes, the issue of sugar intake and its contribution to obesity is a "very live issue". And it's reflected in disagreements over what the National Health and Medical Research Council dietary guidelines should recommend about sugar consumption.

The NHMRC recently completed a review of the 2003 guidelines and produced a draft version, out for public review.

The recommendation for sugar is: "Consume only moderate amounts of sugars and foods containing added sugars".

While consultant nutritionist

Bill Shrapnel quibbles with the statement — it puts sugar on the watch list along with fats, salt and alcohol — he agrees "moderation is one of the foundation stones of good nutrition".

But like Brand-Miller and others, Shrapnel sees Lustig and company's approach as simplistic. "He looks at complex health issues and says the answer is straightforward: sugar is the root of all evil. Tax sugar. Oh, that it were that simple," snaps Shrapnel, deputy chairman of the University of Sydney's Nutrition Research Foundation.

The heart of the argument Lustig has long made is that fructose causes metabolic syndrome, a cluster of risk factors including hypertension, cholesterol abnormalities, an increased risk for clotting and resistance to insulin, a hormone that regulates blood sugar, fats and proteins.

Brand-Miller, for one, criticises Lustig's evidence: "Robert's views are based on studies that used extremely large amounts of fructose, not realistic amounts." Shrapnel goes further: "This guy is saying sugar causes metabolic syndrome. It doesn't. However, excess dietary carbohydrate —





sugar or starch — can exacerbate some of the characteristics of the syndrome. That's very different.”

So too is sugar use in Australia. In their commentary Lustig and his co-authors — health policy experts Laura Schmidt and Claire Brindis — state that sugar consumption has tripled worldwide in the past 50 years.

Not quite, counters dietitian and nutritionist Alan Barclay, with Diabetes Australia and the

Glycemic Index Foundation. “In Australia sugar consumption has dropped 23 per cent since 1980,” he claims. “Despite this, during that time cases of overweight or obese people have doubled, while diabetes has at least tripled.”

Regardless, *Nature* stands by the piece, claiming it was — as Sylvan suggests — intended to “stimulate debate” and is an opinion. *Nature* tells Weekend Health: “In the article he cites research

other than his own linking sugar to metabolic syndrome.” Does he?

Lustig's key reference is a 2003 World Health Organisation technical report. What did it say? “... indices for those with metabolic syndrome revealed a clear benefit of replacing simple by complex carbohydrates.” That's it — in full.

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JANE DEMPSTER

Nutritionists Jennie Brand-Miller and Bill Shrapnel with a variety of healthy foods that all contain sugar