

COCA-COLA FUNDS EFFORT TO ALTER OBESITY BATTLE

EMPHASIS ON EXERCISE

Supporting Science That Discounts Diet, a View Called Misleading

By ANAHAD O'CONNOR

COCA-COLA, the world's largest producer of sugary beverages, is backing a new "science-based" solution to the obesity crisis: To maintain a healthy weight, get more exercise and worry less about cutting calories.

The beverage giant has teamed up with influential scientists who are advancing this message in medical journals, at conferences and through social media. To help the scientists get the word out, Coke has provided financial and logistical support to a new nonprofit organization called the Global Energy Balance Network, which promotes the argument that weight-conscious Americans are overly fixated on how much they eat and drink while not paying enough attention to exercise.

"Most of the focus in the popular media and in the scientific press is, 'Oh they're eating too much, eating too much, eating too much' — blaming fast food, blaming sugary drinks and so on," the group's vice president, Steven N. Blair, an exercise scientist, says in a recent video announcing the new organization. "And there's really virtually no compelling evidence that that, in fact, is the cause."

Health experts say this message is misleading and part of an effort by Coke to deflect criticism about the role sugary drinks have played in the spread of obesity and Type 2 diabetes.

They contend that the company is using the new group to convince the public that physical activity can offset a bad diet despite evidence that exercise has only minimal impact on weight compared with what people consume.

This clash over the science of obesity comes in a period of rising efforts to tax sugary drinks, remove them from schools and stop companies from marketing them to children. In the last two decades, consumption of full-calorie sodas by the average American has dropped by 25 percent.

"Coca-Cola's sales are slipping, and there's this huge political and public backlash against soda, with every major city trying to do something to curb consumption," said Michele Simon, a public health lawyer. "This is a direct response to the ways that the company is losing. They're desperate to stop the bleeding."

Coke has made a substantial investment in the new nonprofit. In response to requests based on state open-records laws, two universities that employ leaders of the Global Energy Balance Network disclosed that Coke had donated \$1.5 million last year to start the organization.

Since 2008, the company has also provided close to \$4 million in funding for various projects to two of the organization's founding members: Dr. Blair, a professor at the University of South Carolina whose research over the past 25

“Coca-Cola’s agenda here is very clear: Get these researchers to confuse the science and deflect attention from dietary intake.”

MARION NESTLE, a professor at New York University and the author of the book “Soda Politics”



IN THE WAKE OF A SODA TAX PROPOSAL Images taken from a video by the Coca-Cola Foundation promoting a \$3 million grant made in 2012 to establish fitness programs in Chicago.

years has formed much of the basis of federal guidelines on physical activity, and Gregory A. Hand, dean of the West Virginia University School of Public Health.

Records show that the network’s website, gebn.org, is registered to Coca-Cola headquarters in Atlanta, and the company is also listed as the site’s administrator. The group’s president, James O. Hill, a professor at the University of Colorado School of Medicine, said Coke had registered the website because the network’s members did not know how.

“They’re not running the show,” he said. “We’re running the show.”

Coca-Cola’s public relations department repeatedly declined requests for an interview with its chief scientific officer, Rhona Applebaum, who has called attention to the new group on Twitter. In a statement, the company said it had a long history of supporting scientific research related to its beverages and topics such as energy balance.

“We partner with some of the foremost experts in the fields of nutrition and physical activity,” the statement said. “It’s important to us that the researchers we work with share their own views and scientific findings, regardless of the outcome, and are transparent and open about our funding.”

Dr. Blair and other scientists affiliated with the group said that Coke had no control over its work or message and that they saw no problem with the company’s support because they had been transparent about it.

But as of last week, the group’s Twitter and Facebook pages, which promote physical activity

as a solution to chronic disease and obesity while remaining largely silent on the role of food and nutrition, made no mention of Coca-Cola’s financial support. So far, the social media campaign has failed to gain much traction: As of Friday, the group had fewer than 1,000 followers on Twitter.

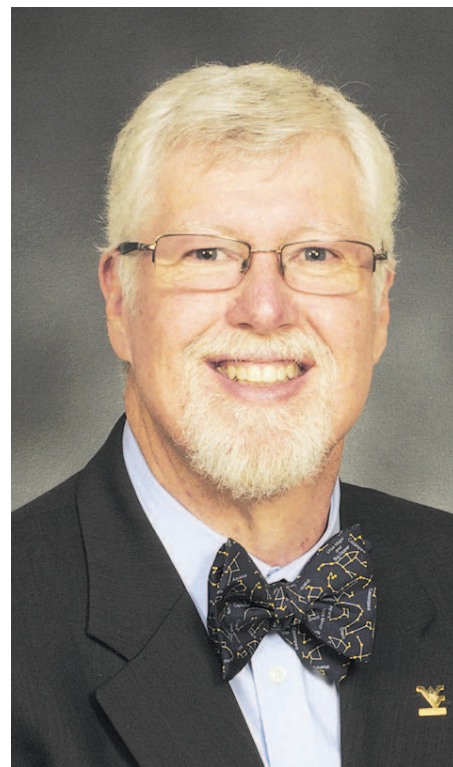
The group’s website also omitted mention of Coke’s backing until Dr. Yoni Freedhoff, an obesity expert at the University of Ottawa, wrote to the organization to inquire about its funding. Dr. Blair said this was an oversight that had been quickly corrected.

“As soon as we discovered that we didn’t have not only Coca-Cola but other funding sources on the website, we put it on there,” Dr. Blair said. “Does that make us totally corrupt in everything we do?”

Coke’s involvement in the new organization is not the only example of corporate-funded research and advocacy to come under fire lately. The American Society for Nutrition and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics have been criticized by public health advocates for forming partnerships with companies such as Kraft Foods, McDonald’s, PepsiCo and Hershey’s. Dietitians have also faced criticism for taking payments from Coke to present the company’s soda as a healthy snack.

Critics say Coke has long cast the obesity epidemic as primarily an exercise problem. “The message is that obesity is not about the foods or beverages you’re consuming, it’s that you’re not balancing those foods with exercise,” Dr. Freedhoff of the University of Ottawa said.

Now, public health advocates say, Coca-Cola is going a step further, recruiting reputable sci-



UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO

WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

SCIENTISTS OF A NONPROFIT BACKED BY COKE From left, Steven N. Blair, a professor at the University of South Carolina; James O. Hill, the organization's president and a professor at the University of Colorado School of Medicine; and Gregory A. Hand, dean of the West Virginia University School of Public Health.

entists to make the case for them.

Dr. Hill, the nonprofit's president, is a co-founder of the National Weight Control Registry, a long-term study of people who have lost weight, and has served on committees for the World Health Organization and the National Institutes of Health. The American Society for Nutrition refers to him as "a leader in the fight against the global obesity epidemic."

Barry M. Popkin, a professor of global nutrition at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, said Coke's support of prominent health researchers was reminiscent of tactics used by the tobacco industry, which enlisted experts to become "merchants of doubt" about the health hazards of smoking.

Marion Nestle, the author of the book "Soda Politics" and a professor of nutrition, food studies and public health at New York University, was especially blunt: "The Global Energy Balance Network is nothing but a front group for Coca-Cola. Coca-Cola's agenda here is very clear: Get these researchers to confuse the science and deflect attention from dietary intake."

Funding from the food industry is not uncommon in scientific research. But studies suggest that the funds tend to bias findings. A recent

analysis of beverage studies, published in the journal PLOS Medicine, found that those funded by Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, the American Beverage Association and the sugar industry were five times more likely to find no link between sugary drinks and weight gain than studies whose authors reported no financial conflicts.

On its website, the new nonprofit promises to be "the voice of science" in discussions about healthy lifestyles and contends that the concept of energy balance provides "a new science-based framework" for achieving a stable body weight.

The group says there is "strong evidence" that the key to preventing weight gain is not reducing food intake — as many public health experts recommend — "but maintaining an active lifestyle and eating more calories." To back up this contention, the group provides links to two research papers, each of which contains this footnote: "The publication of this article was supported by The Coca-Cola Company."

In March, Dr. Hill, Dr. Blair, and Dr. Hand announced the creation of the organization in an editorial in the British Journal of Sports Medicine. They argued that the public and many scientists largely overlooked physical inactivity as a cause of obesity. They said they were cre-

ating the Global Energy Balance Network to raise awareness “about both sides of the energy balance equation.”

The editorial contained a disclosure that the group had received an “unrestricted education gift” from Coca-Cola.

In response to a request made under the state Freedom of Information Act, the University of South Carolina disclosed that Dr. Blair had received more than \$3.5 million in funding from Coke for research projects since 2008.

The university also disclosed that Coca-Cola had provided significant funding to Dr. Hand, who left the University of South Carolina last year for West Virginia. The company gave him \$806,500 for an “energy flux” study in 2011 and \$507,000 last year to establish the Global Energy Balance Network.

It is unclear how much of the money, if any, ended up as personal income for the professors.

“As long as everybody is disclosing their potential conflicts and they’re being managed appropriately, that’s the best that you can do,” Dr. Hand said. “It makes perfect sense that companies would want the best science that they can get.”

The group’s president, Dr. Hill, also has financial ties to Coca-Cola. The company last year gave an “unrestricted monetary gift” of \$1 million to the University of Colorado Foundation. In response to a request made under the Colorado Open Records Act, the university said that Coca-Cola had provided the money “for the purposes of funding” the Global Energy Balance Network.

Dr. Hill said he had sought money from Coke to start the nonprofit because there was no funding available from his university. The group’s website says it is also supported by a few universities and ShareWIK Media Group, a producer of videos about health. Dr. Hill said that he had also received a commitment of help from General Mills, as well as promises of support from other businesses, which had not formally confirmed their offers.



He said he believed public health authorities could more easily change the way people eat by working with the food industry instead of against it.

On its website, the group recommends combining greater exercise and food intake because, Dr. Hill said, “‘Eat less’ has never been a message that’s been effective. The message should be ‘Move more and eat smarter.’”

He emphasized that weight loss involved a combination of complex factors and that his group’s goal was not to play down the role of diet or to portray obesity as solely a problem of inadequate exercise.

“If we are out there saying it’s all about physical activity and it’s not about food, then we deserve criticism,” he said. “But I think we haven’t done that.”

But in news releases and on its website, the group has struck a different tone.

“The media tends to blame the obesity epidemic on our poor eating habits,” one recent news release states. “But are those french fries really the culprit? Dr. Steve Blair explains that you shouldn’t believe everything you see on TV.”



JUSTIN TANG FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

“The message is that obesity is not about the foods you’re consuming, it’s that you’re not balancing those foods with exercise.”

DR. YONI FREEDHOFF,
an obesity expert at the
University of Ottawa

In the news release, Dr. Blair suggests that sedentary behavior is a bigger factor.

Most public health experts say that energy balance is an important concept, because weight gain for most people is about calories in vs. calories out. But the experts say research makes it clear that one side of the equation has a far greater effect.

While people can lose weight in several ways, many studies suggest that those who keep it off for good consume fewer calories. Growing evidence also suggests that maintaining weight loss is easier when people limit their intake of high glycemic foods such as sugary drinks and other refined carbohydrates, which sharply raise blood sugar.

Physical activity is important and certainly helps, experts say. But studies show that exercise increases appetite, causing people to consume more calories. Exercise also expends far fewer calories than most people think. A 12-ounce can of Coca-Cola, for example, contains 140 calories and roughly 10 teaspoons of sugar. “It takes three miles of walking to offset that one can of Coke,” Dr. Popkin said.

In one of the most rigorous studies of physical activity and weight loss, published in the journal *Obesity*, scientists recruited 200 overweight, sedentary adults and put them on an aggressive exercise program. To isolate the effects

of exercise on their weight, the subjects were instructed not to make any changes in their diets.

Participants were monitored to ensure they exercised five to six hours a week, more than double the 2.5 weekly hours of exercise recommended in federal guidelines. After a year, the men had lost an average of just 3.5 pounds, the women 2.5. Almost everyone was still overweight or obese.

“Adding exercise to a diet program helps,” said Dr. Anne McTiernan, the lead author of the study and a researcher at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center in Seattle. “But for weight loss, you’re going to get much more impact with diet changes.”

But much like the research on sugary drinks, studies of physical activity funded by the beverage industry tend to reach conclusions that differ from the findings of studies by independent scientists.

Last week, the Pennington Biomedical Research Center in Louisiana announced the findings of a large new study on exercise in children that determined that lack of physical activity “is the biggest predictor of childhood obesity around the world.”

The news release contained a disclosure: “This research was funded by The Coca-Cola Company.”

Kelly D. Brownell, dean of the Sanford

School of Public Policy at Duke, said that as a business, Coke “focused on pushing a lot of calories in, but then their philanthropy is focused on the calories out part, the exercise.”

In recent years, Coke has donated money to build fitness centers in more than 100 schools across the country. It sponsors a program called “Exercise is Medicine” to encourage doctors to prescribe physical activity to patients. And when Chicago’s City Council proposed a soda

tax in 2012 to help address the city’s obesity problem, Coca-Cola donated \$3 million to establish fitness programs in more than 60 of the city’s community centers.

The initiative to tax soda ultimately failed.

“Reversing the obesity trend won’t happen overnight,” Coca-Cola said in an ad for its Chicago exercise initiative. “But for thousands of families in Chicago, it starts now, with the next push-up, a single situp or a jumping jack.” ■

In Obesity Debate, Coke Spends Lavishly

By ANAHAD O'CONNOR

WHEN the American Academy of Pediatrics needed support for a website it created to promote children's health, it turned to a surprising partner: Coca-Cola.

The world's largest maker of sugary beverages, Coca-Cola has given nearly \$3 million to the academy over the past six years, making it the only "gold" sponsor of the HealthyChildren.org website. Even though the pediatric academy has said publicly that sugary drinks contribute to the obesity epidemic, the group praises Coke on its website, calling it a "distinguished" company for its commitment to "better the health of children worldwide."

The extent of the financial ties between Coke and the Academy of Pediatrics was revealed last week when the company released a detailed list of nearly \$120 million in grants, large and small, given to medical, health and community organizations since 2010. Not only has Coke's philanthropy earned it praise from influential medical groups, the soda grants appear to have, in some cases, won the company allies in anti-soda initiatives, wielded influence

Grants by Coca-Cola seem to shift focus from soda as a contributor to health issues.

over health recommendations about soft drinks, and shifted scientific focus away from soda as a factor in the causes of obesity.

The list of Coke donations was released after the company's chief executive, Muhtar Kent, promised to be transparent about its partnerships in the health community. The move was prompted by criticism that the company has paid for scientific research that plays down the role of Coke products in the spread of obesity, an issue first reported last month in The New York Times.

In addition to the Academy of Pediatrics, Coke beneficiaries include a number of respected medical and health groups, including \$3.1 million to the American College of Cardiology, more than \$3.5 million to the American Academy of Family Physicians, \$2 million to the American Cancer Society and roughly \$1.7 million to the country's largest organization of dietitians, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

Dr. Karen Remley, the chief executive of the Academy of Pediatrics, said Coke's support did not influence the information her group put on its website. Although Coke's logo remained on the group's website as of Monday, she said the group was ending its relationship with Coke at the end of the year. "Collectively, the members, the board and the staff went through the process and said that we no longer share the same values with Coca-Cola," she said.

Dr. Remley did not say when the group ended its relationship with Coke, but pediatricians interviewed for this article said the Coke partnership was the focus of discussion at chapters around the country because doctors were upset by it. At the academy's Annual Leadership Forum in March — where academy members can vote on resolutions to submit to the acad-



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ALAN GREENE/DRGREENE.COM



BILL HAYES

Yoni Freedhoff, top, an obesity expert at the University of Ottawa, criticized taking money from a company like Coca-Cola that is “absolutely thought to be a major player in obesity.” Marion Nestle of New York University, above, said, “Any scientist or dietitian who is willing to take Coca-Cola funding gets it.” Above left, Coca-Cola logos were on items at the American Academy of Pediatrics national conference in 2011.

emy leadership — one of the top two resolutions called for the academy to sever its relationship with Coke.

“The purpose of the academy, of which I am a proud member, is to protect the health and lives of children,” said Dr. Arnold H. Matlin, a retired pediatrician from New York who drafted the Coke resolution. “Coca-Cola is bad for children, and the A.A.P. should never accept sponsorship from Coke or any other company that makes sugar-sweetened beverages. It’s obscene.”

The pediatrician Alan Greene, who runs the

popular website DrGreene.com, said Coke’s influence was seen beyond the website. He was shocked at the group’s national conference in 2011 in Boston when he saw thousands of pediatricians carrying cups and giant bags emblazoned with the Coca-Cola logo. He also noted that Coke sponsored a lavish welcome reception.

“Excess consumption of sugary drinks is one of the biggest threats to the health of our children, so when I first saw this, it seemed quite jarring to me,” Dr. Greene said.

In an interview, Sandy Douglas, the presi-

dent of Coca-Cola North America, said the company was committed to helping people understand how to live “a healthy, active lifestyle,” and that the company wanted to support organizations that share this message.

“The key here is that each one of these organizations is very well respected and completely independent,” he said.

Mr. Douglas emphasized that in addition to supporting health and wellness programs, the company offers low and zero-calorie options like bottled water, Diet Coke and “mini cans” of Coca-Cola. And he said he did not think that sugary drinks should be eliminated from children’s diets.

“Pediatricians are absolutely right to be stressing healthy eating and drinking to parents and kids,” he said. “But I suspect that completely eliminating them is not necessary for kids to be healthy any more than eliminating ice cream, birthday cakes or cookies. The key is moderation.”

While Coke said that only \$29 million, or less than 25 percent of the grant money, was used for academic research, the money has already begun to shape the international debate around obesity. Just last month, Louisiana State University’s Pennington Biomedical Research Center announced the findings of a large Coke-funded study of 6,000 children from 12 countries that determined that the major lifestyle factors for childhood obesity around the world were a lack of exercise, not enough sleep and too much television. Coke has given more than \$7.5 million to the university research center or its foundation over the past five years, making L.S.U. the single largest recipient of Coke money since 2010.

The university’s press release was notable in that it did not mention the role of soft drinks in the obesity epidemic. By comparison, in 2010, the surgeon general listed “reducing consumption of sodas and juices with added sugars” as the first item on a list of “healthy choices” needed to improve the health of the nation.

In a statement, the Pennington research center said it complied “with all appropriate ethical safeguards,” disclosed conflicts of interests in published papers and

press releases, and often used external advisory boards and other methods “to assure the quality of our science.”

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, which has received \$1.7 million in Coke funding since 2010, has dedicated an entire page to Coke on its website, calling it a “Premier Sponsor.” The group has even allowed Coke’s “Beverage Institute for Health and Wellness” to provide continuing education credits for academy members.

On Monday, an academy spokesman, Ryan O’Malley, suggested its financial relationship with Coca-Cola had ended. In an email, Mr. O’Malley said the academy’s sponsorship agreement with Coca-Cola would “expire” at the end of 2015.

Andy Bellatti, a registered dietitian in Las Vegas, said that allowing Coke and others in the food industry to sponsor education sessions for dietitians undermined the group’s credibility. In 2013, Mr. Bellatti and other dietitians formed an organization called Dietitians for Professional Integrity to pressure the academy to end its corporate sponsorships.

The American Academy of Family Physicians, which received more than \$3.5 million in funding, also makes allowances for soft drinks in its recommendations. It notes that sugar-sweetened drinks add sugar and calories to a person’s diet, but “staying hydrated is important for good health.” Among its suggested substitutes are flavored water, unsweetened tea and diet soda — all products sold by Coke.

Marion Nestle, a professor of nutrition, food studies and public health at New York University, said she was pleased that Coca-Cola had lived up to its promise to provide greater transparency, but she did not know of another food company so “deeply and widely entrenched in so many public organizations.”

“What I find most remarkable about this list is its length and comprehensiveness,” said Dr. Nestle, author of the book “Soda Politics.” “No organization, no matter how small, goes unfunded. Any scientist or dietitian who is willing to take Coca-Cola funding gets it.”

For example, the list showed that Coca-Cola provided many large grants to community orga-

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*SANDY DOUGLAS
PRESIDENT, COCA-COLA NORTH
AMERICA, ON SUGARED SODAS*

nizations, including more than \$6 million to the Boys & Girls Clubs of America. It also donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to minority groups like the N.A.A.C.P., which received \$500,000 since 2010, and the Hispanic Federation, which received \$325,000. Both of those groups filed amicus briefs supporting a lawsuit filed by the beverage industry in 2013 to block a proposal by New York's mayor, Michael R. Bloomberg, for a citywide ban on large sugary beverages.

Their allegiance to the beverage industry was particularly shocking because minorities have disproportionately high rates of obesity and could benefit the most from soda restrictions, health advocates say.

"These big minority organizations supported the industry even though the burden of the soda industry is borne by the minority community," Dr. Nestle said.

The proposed soda restrictions ultimately failed.

Yoni Freedhoff, an obesity expert at the University of Ottawa, said he was surprised by the sheer number of community and medical organizations that had accepted large sums of money from Coca-Cola.

"These organizations are forming partnerships with a company whose products are absolutely thought to be a major player in obesity and the spread of chronic, noncommunicable diseases," he said. ■



HEALTHY CONSUMER

Research Group Funded by Coca-Cola to Disband

By ANAHAD O'CONNOR

A GROUP called the Global Energy Balance Network, led by scientists and created by Coca-Cola, announced this week that it was shutting down after months of pressure from public health authorities who said that the group's mission was to play down the link between soft drinks and obesity.

Coke's financial backing of the group, reported by The New York Times in August, prompted criticism that the company was trying to shape obesity research and stifle criticism of its products.

Public health authorities complained that Coke, the world's largest producer of sugary beverages, was adopting tactics once used by the tobacco industry, which for decades enlisted experts to raise doubts about the health hazards of smoking. Last month, the University of Colorado School of Medicine said it would return a \$1 million grant that Coca-Cola had provided to help start the organization.

Monday night, the Global Energy Balance Network removed all content from its website and posted a brief statement saying it was discontinuing its operations "due to resource limitations."

The group's president, James O. Hill, a prominent obesity researcher and professor at the University of Colorado, declined a request for comment.

The University of South Carolina had also accepted \$500,000 from Coke to help start the group. But a spokesman for the university, Wes Hickman, did not return phone calls or messages on Tuesday asking what the university planned to do with the money it had taken from Coke.



MATT ROURKE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Yoni Freedhoff, an obesity expert at the University of Ottawa who first raised questions about the group's funding, said he believed the group was disbanding because it had lost its credibility.

"I think ultimately the Global Energy Balance Network was a megaphone for Coca-Cola," he said. "And now that Coca-Cola is no longer providing the funds to support that megaphone, it's shutting down. I think that speaks to the purpose of the establishment of this group."

For months, the group denied that it was allowing Coke to influence its message or the work of its scientists.

But the public health community responded sharply. In August, a letter written by the

chairman of the nutrition department at Harvard's school of public health and signed by 36 other scientists criticized Coca-Cola and the Global Energy Balance Network for spreading "scientific nonsense."

Other health groups that had accepted millions of dollars in funding from Coke, including the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, announced a short time later that they were ending their relationships with Coke.

In a statement issued in August, Dr. Hill acknowledged that Coca-Cola had provided the money to start the Global Energy Balance Network, but insisted that Coca-Cola had "no say in how these funds are spent" and that it "does not have any input into our organization."

But a series of emails obtained by The Associated Press and reported last week suggested that Dr. Hill had allowed Coke to help pick the group's leaders, create its mission statement and design its website.

In one exchange with Dr. Hill, Coke's chief scientist, Rhona Applebaum, shared a proposal outlining the establishment of the group and its purpose. "Akin to a political campaign," the pro-

posal said, "we will develop, deploy and evolve a powerful and multi-faceted strategy to counter radical organizations and their proponents."

Dr. Hill also proposed doing a study that would help Coca-Cola focus the blame for obesity on a lack of exercise and urged the company to pay for it.

"This would be a very large and expensive study, but could be a game changer," he wrote to executives at the company. "We need this study to be done."

Last week, Coca-Cola announced that Dr. Applebaum was retiring and that the company would not be seeking a successor. The company said it was dispatching a top executive, Sandy Douglas, to meet with public health advocates around the country.

In a statement, Coke's chief executive, Muhtar Kent, said the company was working on becoming more transparent.

"Our support for scientific research was based on the desire to identify a more holistic, workable approach based on the best evidence," he said. "Clearly, we have more work to do to reflect the values of this great company in all that we do." ■