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SWEET LIES

BY HILARY ACHAUER

New documentary "Sugar Coated" reveals a secret PR campaign and its disastrous impact on health.





Michèle Hozer, director of "Sugar Coated."

"All of a sudden this debate sort of stopped," said Michèle Hozer, director of the new documentary "Sugar Coated."

By the '90s the low-fat craze swept the country. Snackwells cookies—introduced in 1992—were all the rage, and consumers became fat-phobic, ignoring the high amounts of sugar that went into making the low-fat treats.

"And I thought, 'Well, what happened? Did we get this collective amnesia? Why did this debate stop?'" Hozer asked.

In "Sugar Coated," Hozer reveals her answers.

The Smoking Gun

Dentist Cristin Kearns got involved in the sugar debate almost by accident.

She was working at Inner City Health Center in Denver, Colorado, and the majority of her patients had cavities in every tooth. She saw massive bone loss and 45-year-olds who had to have all their teeth removed.

"Obviously sugar consumption was the root cause of much of the disease I was treating," Kearns said in the documentary.

She attended a conference on gum disease and diabetes in Oregon, and the keynote speaker passed out a booklet called "The Fast Food Guide to Nutrition." Sweet tea was listed as a healthy drink. Angered by the misinformation, Kearns approached the speaker and asked how sweet tea could get a green light.

"Well, there is no evidence that links sugar to chronic disease," Kearns said she was told.

Kearns knew this was false, so she figured some sort of political agenda was shaping the advice given at the conference—and she wanted evidence. She typed "sugar" into the computer at a local library, and a reference to Great Western Sugar appeared. When the company closed in 1976, it donated its records to local libraries in Colorado. Kearns followed the trail to Colorado State University, where she found confidential documents from The Sugar Association Inc. that outlined its PR strategy in the 1970s.

The '70s were a crucial time for the sugar industry. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) was reviewing the scientific evidence surrounding the health effects of sugar, so The Sugar Association launched a massive PR campaign aimed at getting a safety approval from the FDA. The campaign worked. Sugar won.

Daily consumption of sugar increased by 46 percent in the last 30 years—and rates of diabetes, obesity and non-alcoholic fatty liver disease increased as well.

In the archived documents Kearns found a photo of smiling sugar executives accepting a Silver Anvil Award—the equivalent of a Grammy in the PR community—for influencing public opinion about the health effects of sugar consumption.

Soon fat was the dietary enemy. Daily consumption of sugar increased by 46 percent in the last 30 years—and rates of diabetes, obesity and non-alcoholic fatty liver disease increased as well.

Same Debate, Different Decade

Hozer's entry into the sugar wars began when she went to a conference and heard a doctor talk about the relationship between sugar consumption and Alzheimer's disease. She'd always been conscious of what she ate and concerned about her health, but Alzheimer's? That was something else.

So Hozer began researching. She read Gary Taubes' 2011 New York Times article "Is Sugar Toxic?" and reached out to the author, who told her about Kearns' discovery. Hozer watched Dr. Robert Lustig's 2009 lecture "Sugar: The Bitter Truth," which went viral and by 2015 had 5.8 million views. Lustig, a pediatric endocrinologist, believes sugar is the fundamental problem in the modern diet.

Everything came together when Hozer and her research team watched the 1986 documentary "The Sugar Trap," which dealt with the health effects of eating too much sugar.

"Our research team had this epiphany when we saw (that) old film," Hozer said. "That film, I'll tell you, it looks like it could have been made today. Same kind of studies, same kinds of issues—is it sugar, is it fat?"

When Hozer saw the papers Kearns found, she realized the issue was much larger than the simple question "is sugar toxic?"

"Because until we understand our history, we are not going to be able to change our present situation," Hozer said. "As a filmmaker, I thought that was really important ... there is the idea that we've been through this before. I think that's really important."

Beginning in the 1940s, the sugar industry funded research that pointed to fat, not sugar, as the cause of diabetes, obesity and heart disease. Frederick Stare was a key scientist. Founder and chairman of the department of nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health, Stare was an outspoken advocate of sugar, testifying before Congress about the health benefits of sugar and going on TV and radio shows throughout the United States to spread the industry's message and dispel fears about the harmful effects of sugar.

"(Stare's) department at Harvard had been taking money from the sugar industry since, well, the 1940s, in significant sums ... hundreds of thousands of dollars in a time when that was a lot of money," Taubes said in the film.

A [Mother Jones article](#) written by Taubes and Kearns (credited as Cristin Kearns Couzens) reveals the sugar industry funded 30 papers in Stare's department from 1952 through 1956, and General Foods—the company behind Kool-Aid and other products—donated \$1 million in 1970 for a new building for the Harvard School of Public Health. The Sugar Association documents outline a media plan with Stare as a primary spokesperson.

Ancel Keys was another critic of fat and defender of sugar. His University of Minnesota laboratory received money from the sugar industry starting in the 1940s, and Keys loudly and regularly identified fat—not sugar—as the cause of heart disease.

We weren't always so unhealthy.

Until 1980, approximately 12-14 percent of Americans were obese, but by the end of that decade the number had about doubled, reaching 22-25 percent. Similarly, diabetes rates tripled over the last 30 years to produce about 347 million worldwide cases. Obesity has become an epidemic, affecting children, putting a strain on our health-care system and introducing previously unheard-of conditions such as non-alcoholic fatty liver disease.

In the '70s and '80s, scientists and the media engaged in a lively discussion about the health effects of sugar versus those of fat. Scientists pointed to the links between high sugar consumption, diabetes and heart disease.

“Like in the tobacco debate, I think there was a turnaround in public opinion when the public knew or realized through the tobacco secret documents that the tobacco industry knew (cigarettes were) bad for them, and that it was addictive and it caused cancer. When (the public) realized that those companies just sort of lied to them, there was a lot of movement and a turnaround,” Hozer said.

By shining a light on the sugar industry’s manipulation of public opinion, Hozer is hoping people will realize much of what they know about the health effects of dietary fat and sugar comes from a sugar-industry-funded PR campaign—a campaign that has made much of the population overweight and extremely unhealthy.

Conscious Consumption

The American Heart Association recommends women consume no more than 6 tsp. of sugar daily and men no more than 9 tsp. However, a 2009 [Associated Press story](#) reported Americans consume 22 tsp. of sugar per day on average, while teenagers consume about 34 tsp. of sugar daily.

Sugar has infiltrated every part of our life, and most people are unaware of exactly how much sugar they consume. A group of elementary-school-age boys finish a baseball game, and each is handed a 12-oz. bottle of Gatorade. Each bottle contains 21 g of sugar, or about 5 tsp.—just about the recommended daily allowance for adult women consumed in a few gulps. They’d be better off eating a cookie, which typically contains only about 6 g of sugar.

Soda is the worst offender. A 12-oz. can of Coca-Cola holds 39 g of sugar, more than 9 tsp. Measure 9 tsp. into a bowl and imagine downing the pile in the time it takes to drink a can of soda.

“Studies from Europe show that if you consumed one soda per day, your risk of diabetes goes up 29 percent—irrespective of the calories, irrespective of your weight, irrespective of anything else you eat,” Lustig said in a TEDx Talks clip used in “Sugar Coated.”

Hozer thinks we might be more aware of how much we’re consuming if food were labeled differently. Most people can’t picture a gram, but they do know what a teaspoon looks like (4 g of sugar is equal to 1 tsp.).



In the '70s, The Sugar Association worked to ensure people never connected the dots and discovered the true health effects of sugar.



A successful PR campaign made sugar a part of birthdays, holidays and special occasions, while fat was demonized.

A 12-oz. can of Coca-Cola holds 39 g of sugar, more than 9 tsp. Measure 9 tsp. into a bowl and imagine downing the pile in the time it takes to drink a can of soda.

“If (the number of teaspoons) were on labels, then foods that were 80 percent sugar or 90 percent sugar would have a hard time putting front-of-label health benefits like ‘we’re good on fiber and good on this,’” Hozer said.

Before that happens, we as consumers can make a difference with our wallets.

“You stop buying juice. The companies will notice,” Hozer said. “Stop buying that stuff and start demanding a lower sugar count.”

“Sugar Coated” is now available on [Vimeo on Demand](#). ■

About the Author

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