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LINES OF COKE

Food-industry watchdogs: “Exercise is medicine” just a platitude designed to distance Big Soda from chronic disease.

BY ANDRÉA MARIA CECIL | FEBRUARY 2016

At first blush, it seems like a harmless statement: “Exercise is medicine.”

Exercise, after all, is good.

“It’s plainly true,” said Gary Ruskin, co-founder and co-director of U.S. Right to Know, a whistleblower nonprofit targeting the food industry. “Physical and mental health indicators are improved through exercise. In general, it’s a great thing.”

Exercise Is Medicine (EIM)—registered trademark—as promoted by the **American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM)**, however, is not a great thing, Ruskin noted.

“ACSM is an organization that is somewhat **aligned with Coca-Cola**, so this is a part of Coca-Cola’s effort to **deny its responsibility** for the epidemic of soda-related diseases that have plagued our country,” he said.

EIM is one of the ACSM’s major initiatives. The Coca-Cola Co. is the program’s first founding partner, noted ACSM CEO and executive vice president Jim Whitehead in 2012.

If it weren’t for Coca-Cola, “EIM would not have been able to touch the public to the extent that it has,” Whitehead was quoted as saying in an **article** published on Coca-Cola’s Journey site.

The ACSM—neither a college nor a medical body—is a nonprofit that describes itself as the world’s largest sports-medicine and exercise-science organization. Coke is among its **official corporate partners**.

Through the EIM scheme, the ACSM offers a **credential** it bills as providing “the skills and knowledge necessary to safely and effectively develop, implement and lead exercise programs—and, you’ll know how to navigate the health care system in order to create and cultivate patient relationships.” The cost to take the ACSM’s EIM exam is US\$50.

Central to the EIM initiative is the notion of **doctor-prescribed physical activity**.

That is a problem, noted Greg Glassman, CrossFit Inc. Founder and CEO.

“When exercise is medicine according to Coca-Cola, then CrossFit is nothing short of medical malpractice,” he told an audience on Nov. 12 at CrossFit Downey in Southern California when touring affiliates as part of the “**California Invasion: Rally to Fight Big Soda**.”

Lon Kilgore detailed many other flaws in the EIM program in “**Exercise Is Medicine: Imprecision and Impracticality**.”

Coke—alongside Dr. Pepper Snapple Group, PepsiCo and the American Beverage Association—is also behind a similar effort called **Mixify**. Aimed at youth, Mixify ads can be seen on public-transportation vehicles, bus stops, vending machines and billboards, and as exhibits in filings related to **the beverage association’s lawsuit** against the City of San Francisco over its legislation requiring warning labels on ads for sugary beverages. Mixify promotes the EIM idea that one simply has to **balance calories in with calories out** to lead a healthy lifestyle.

Science has shown otherwise.

“It really bothers me that the industry is trying to spread this notion that ... you just balance with exercise and you can eat whatever you want,” said Kimber Stanhope, associate research nutritional biologist in the Department of Molecular Biosciences at the University of California-Davis.

“I think it’s a complete fallacy that ... you get to pick a life of exercise or a life of healthy eating but not both.”
—Kimber Stanhope

She continued: “I think it’s a complete fallacy that ... you get to pick a life of exercise or a life of healthy eating but not both.”

By placing a spotlight on exercise rather than diet, Big Soda diverts attention away from itself, explained Dr. Kevin Strong, a pediatrician and founder of **Dunk the Junk**, a nonprofit focused on educating youth about the dangers of eating junk food.

“They’re trying to create a distraction from the real cause, which is overconsumption of sugar mainly through sugary drinks,” he said. “That’s clever. That’s what I’d do if my paycheck was dependent on how much sugar I could sell—and if I had no ethics.”

Sugary drinks—due to their high sugar content and their rate of ingestion—are the leading cause of chronic disease, Strong added.



Exercise and health care are not inherently at odds, but it’s a problem when Coke-sponsored programs try to convince people they can erase poor nutrition with exercise.

“There’s no question what’s causing weight gain and the Type 2 diabetes epidemic. It’s very closely tied to sugar consumption. ... Sugar doesn’t create satiety and it’s addictive.”

Studies showing soda’s impact on obesity, as well as the benefits of removing soda and fructose from the diet, are strong, Ruskin said. Unfortunately, Coke acts like a megaphone, finding professors, doctors and scientists willing to toe the “Taste the Feeling” line and state with certainty that sugary beverages can indeed be part of a healthy lifestyle.

“Nobody will believe it when Coke says their products are not a public-health danger ... so they absolutely need—crucially need—scientists who look independent who say, ‘Pay attention to exercise. Don’t pay attention to food, and especially don’t pay attention to the soda stuff,’” Ruskin said.

In short, Coke’s support of the ACSM’s EIM initiative is simply a way to **shift the focus** away from its products and onto consumers’ responsibility to exercise lest they suffer metabolic derangement.

“They’re trying to evade responsibility, ... redeem their name with many members of the public,” Ruskin said. “(Soda is) rightly seen as a public-health danger and a vehicle for the slow poisoning of our nation.” ■

About the Author

Andréa Maria Cecil is assistant managing editor and head writer of the CrossFit Journal.