

The War on Obesity: A Battle Worth Fighting?

ADA FNCE Debate

September 25, 2011

Speakers: John Foreyt and Linda Bacon

Moderated by Christine Palumbo

This is an excerpt from one of Linda Bacon's rebuttals, discussing one reason why our presented views differ so much. The excerpt is minorly edited for smooth readability, but stays very close to the actual talk:

Unfortunately, money reinforces – and played a role in creating - those assumptions most of us have about weight. To explain how, I need to raise an uncomfortable issue.

The ADA asked John and me to disclose potential conflicts of interest. Mine are few: My non-salaried income is negligible and I have a policy not to accept money from the diet, food or pharmaceutical industries, either directly or funneled through my university. [[Link to my COI form.](#)]

By contrast, John lists ties to pharmaceutical companies researching weight loss drugs; diet companies that make food for weight loss, a weight loss center, and several other relevant affiliations. [[Link to John's COI form.](#)]

Am I calling John corrupt for these affiliations? Am I saying his research results are for sale?

I am not. I want to be clear that I don't doubt John's honesty or the sincerity of his work. I have every reason to believe he is as committed as I am to helping people and improving health.

So why talk about industry ties? It's because they have a way of creating and reinforcing those pervasive cultural assumptions I talked about.

Challenging mainstream ideas about obesity can be hard for the ordinary person. How much harder then, for those whose livelihoods and reputations depend on it?

Yes, careers in this field depend on adhering to the status quo because research follows the money. Very little funding for obesity studies does *not* come from corporations who have a vested interest in results. Sure, there are government funds, but even those government funds are doled out by grant review committees composed of researchers with ties, like Dr. Foreyt's, to private industry.

And the impact? At worst, one hears of scientists pressured to fudge unfavorable results, or put their names on papers written by corporate PR offices.

Most researchers are too ethical for that, though.

Industry's greater influence is more subtle. If all the money in your field follows popular cultural assumptions – that fat kills, for instance, or weight loss works, or the earth is flat – then some degree of buy-in is required for anyone who wants to conduct studies and advance in the field. And it becomes really hard, and unsafe, to hear otherwise or to evaluate challenging information like the science behind HAES.

I speak from experience when I tell you that questioning the status quo limits career opportunities. Columbus had to go to Portugal for *his* research funding.

Accepting a new paradigm, or even thinking about it, can be a frightening prospect. It takes a lot of courage to open your mind to a new challenge when the stakes are so high. Indeed, it may not be a conscious choice to avoid fully engaging with the HAES challenge. Defense mechanisms frequently operate below the level of conscious thought, allowing us to dismiss information before it threatens our worldview.