

Author's response to reviews

Title: Trends in sugar supply and consumption in Australia: Is there an Australian Paradox?

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Trends in sugar supply and consumption in Australia: Is there an Australian Paradox?

Thank you for your further consideration of our paper, and we are pleased to receive a second set of reviews of the manuscript.

We very much appreciated the helpful and constructive comments received from the four reviewers in the first round of review of our manuscript. We feel we were able to respond positively to all of the suggestions made by each reviewer, and the result was a better and stronger manuscript.

It appears that three of the four reviewers are now happy with our changes to the manuscript. Reviewer 4 has written a lengthy critique of our piece. We note that the clearly stated aim of our paper was to reconsider trends in sugar consumption in Australia, in light of the published claim by Barclay and Brand-Miller that there is an “Australian Paradox” — that sugar consumption declined in Australia during the period when obesity rates rose dramatically. The conclusion of our work was that Barclay and Brand-Miller missed an important source of sugar in measuring the domestic sugar supply, when they relied on data from the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). The FAO data exclude sugar in imported manufactured foods, because of the difficulty in measuring these internationally when many countries lack data on imports and exports from which these could be derived. However, our analysis of Australian customs data shows that importation of manufactured foods rose sharply over the period in question, from almost nothing to represent over 20% of sugar in the Australian sugar supply, questioning the existence of the “Australian Paradox”.

We were somewhat surprised that you chose to ask Professor Barclay to review our manuscript, as our piece was obviously critical of his work and he may have a vested interest in defending his paper. Nevertheless we were very pleased to receive his comments on our piece, and addressed all of his concerns in his first review. We feel that his further detailed critique of our paper goes beyond reviewing our manuscript to determine its scientific quality and suitability for publication, and is instead a defence of his previously published work.

If there is indeed an Australian Paradox, as Professor Barclay claims, this has very significant public health implications and is potentially very important for relevant industries as well. If the Australian Paradox were confirmed it would clearly imply that sugar consumption did not play a part in the epidemic of obesity in Australia, and there would be no need to reduce sugar consumption in Australia. This would contradict current public health guidelines, and current funded public health campaigns and programs in Australia.

We believe that when studies are published that have important ramifications for population health, it is entirely appropriate that they be tested and that others try to replicate them. And we believe that it is important that these be published in the literature. We would very much hope that our work, if and when published, would be subject to the same degree of scrutiny to which we have subjected Professor Barclay’s work. And we would hope that journals such as yours would welcome the publication, after it has been independently reviewed, of critiques such as the one Professor Barclay has now submitted in review of our manuscript. We don’t believe, however, that it is appropriate for this type of back and forth to take place through the review mechanism.

We stand by the work we have submitted. We have liaised very closely with all relevant stakeholders to ensure our claims are accurate including the Food and Agriculture Organisation (where we spoke with their chief methodologist several times to verify that they do not include the sugar content of imported refined products in their food balance sheets), the Australian Bureau of Statistics, and sugar industry analysts Green Pool Commodity Specialists.

We respect Professor Barclay's right to defend his work, but we will not be able to modify our paper to change our conclusion to agree with him, as we do not believe, based on our extensive review of all available data, that his conclusions are correct. We would ask you to consider, at this stage, whether you feel our paper is suitable for publication in your journal. We would suggest that Professor Barclay be encouraged to submit his critique for publication and independent review.

Thank you for your consideration,

Professor David Lawrence
The University of Western Australia

On behalf of all authors