Reviewer’s report


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Reviewer: Bruce Neal

Reviewer’s report:

This is a nicely written paper with a clear message. It certainly warrants publication. The methods are strong and the limitations clearly identified. Appropriate steps have been taken to understand the extent to which systematic or random errors might account for the results. It is my judgment that the right conclusions have been drawn and that the findings are highly significant. One thing I would like to see is a much stronger conclusion drawn in terms of the enormous responsibility this places on the food industry and those in government that have the power to control the food industry. It is only in this regard that the paper falls short. Food and beverage companies are divesting themselves of responsibility for the US obesity crisis and are using physical activity programs as a smokescreen to distract from the massive adverse effects their products are having on waistlines. This powerful piece of research has much more to say in that regard than is actually stated. If this cannot be addressed in the paper perhaps there can be an accompanying editorial that picks up on this point because it is vital that it comes across, loud and clear.

I have a few more specific comments on the paper:

Methods
There is a note that the NHANES response rate needs adding for other years. This should be done.

There also appears to be unnecessary repetition about response rates in the methods section.

Results
I would like to know how big the differences were between the findings of the four models. Does the selection of variables included change the qualitative conclusions for any outcome? Or are the differences just quantitative in nature. And if the latter are the differences large or small? It seems unusual for this group of researchers not to provide more insight into this aspect of the work.

Discussion
Its rates of IHD, not rats
Is it right to blame Americans? The “personal choice” perspective implied is a pretty old fashioned way of thinking about causation in obesity. It’s almost certainly much more about food environments that, while protecting the populace from acute illness caused by spoiled food, subject the population to perpetual
long-term food poisoning that causes chronic diet-related ill health on an industrial scale. It’s the transnational food corporations, the advertising agencies and the weak regulatory environment that the American government oversees that is responsible. These are now the chief vectors of disease in the US.

As per the comment in the results section, it would also be helpful to have a bit more of a description about what was the thinking behind the inclusion of each set of variables in the different models that were fitted. And how the findings varied for each model, for each outcome and what this might mean for the robustness of the estimates obtained.

**Level of interest:** An article of outstanding merit and interest in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

- Have you in the past five years received reimbursements, fees, funding, or salary from an organisation that may in any way gain or lose financially from the publication of this manuscript, either now or in the future? Yes - travel reimbursement and honorarium as consultant for Pepsico (2011), research support from Australian Food and Grocery Council (2013)

- Do you hold any stocks or shares in an organisation that may in any way gain or lose financially from the publication of this manuscript, either now or in the future? No

- Do you hold or are you currently applying for any patents relating to the content of the manuscript? Have you received reimbursements, fees, funding, or salary from an organization that holds or has applied for patents relating to the content of the manuscript? No

- Do you have any other financial competing interests? No

- Do you have any non-financial competing interests in relation to this paper? Yes, I advocate in the field of food labelling, food reformulation and diet quality and I chair the Australian Division of World Action on Salt and Health.