

**From:** Steven Heymsfield [mailto:Steven.Heymsfield@pbrc.edu]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, October 30, 2018 2:17 PM  
**To:** marion.nestle@nyu.edu  
**Cc:** Liz Szabo <LSzabo@kff.org>  
**Subject:** RE: Obesity Society's response

Marion,

[More thoughts on your blog including my name and institution.](#)

## The Obesity Society should support public health, not corporate health

My email inbox was flooded last week with [The Obesity Society's call for more research](#) on the value of taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages.

“Although taxing SSBs might generate revenue that can be used to promote other healthy food items, the net outcome may not necessarily decrease overweight and obesity rates in the United States or worldwide,” said Steven B. Heymsfield, MD, FTOS, President-Elect of The Obesity Society (TOS) and professor and director of the Body Composition-Metabolism Laboratory at the Pennington Biomedical Research Center at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge.

Why would [a professional society that represents people who ostensibly care](#) about obesity science, treatment, and prevention issue a statement aimed at casting doubt on a demonstrably effective public health measure? (Soda companies know the taxes are effective; that's why they fight them so hard). **(That's your hypothesis, one not universally supported by TOS members or hard data).**

The Obesity Society (TOS), alas, often appears far more favorable to the interests of food and beverage companies than those of public health **(what evidence do you have for this statement?)**. Could funding of the society and its members have anything to do with this?

Here is the TOS [position on corporate funding](#):

TOS recognizes the value in providing any donor that wishes to support our mission to find solutions to the obesity epidemic the opportunity to provide financial support. **True**

The current TOS policy expressly eliminates all forms of evaluation or judgment of the funding source (other than the stipulation that funding is reasonably assumed not to be derived from activities deemed 'illegal'). **Only partially true; our ethics committee screens courting companies all of the time, many of which are turned away.**

TOS chooses instead to focus its ethical mission on transparency in disclosing the sources of funding, clear stipulations outlining our commitment to the ethical use of funds, and a

commitment to non-influence of the funding sources over the scientific aspects of funded projects and TOS as a whole. **True**

Translation: We will take money from any company, regardless of the effects of its products on public health. **Completely false**

The TOS rationale is that disclosure takes care of the problem and that funding won't influence the science. Unfortunately for this view, research demonstrates that disclosure does not eliminate the influence of funding, and the influence of funding is considerable—though often unrecognized, as is apparent in this case. **What is apparent? You are implying that the TOS position on the sugar tax derives from our corporate interests. We are all entitled to hypotheses; I would like to see you support this one with facts.**

TOS has a disclosure policy, and discloses its officers' conflicts of interest. These are considerable.

- The TOS president's university, Louisiana State, has received more funding from Coca-Cola than any other in recent years. Researchers there have been funded generously by Coca-Cola. **And thus, by inference, I am biased towards sugar-sweetened beverages?**
- An elected president of TOS had to resign over charges that he had been paid by the restaurant industry to file an affidavit opposing New York City's calorie-labeling proposal. **Nothing to do with the current question; that individual was later elected into the National Academy of Sciences following a rigorous international review.**

In 2013, Dr. Yoni Freedhoff resigned his TOS membership over the society's sponsorship policies. In his comment on the current TOS statement, Freedhoff points out that "sugar-sweetened beverage taxes decrease sugar-sweetened beverage consumption and increase healthier beverage consumption while providing the greatest potential health benefits to low income consumers."

TOS members who care about creating a healthier food environment should consider joining Dr. Freedhoff. If not, they should insist that TOS leadership take vigorous pro-public health stances on matters affecting their patients' health.