

Eating our way to hell

The story of how the US food industry hijacks science is a chiller, finds **Nic Fleming**

Unsavory Truth: How food companies skew the science of what we eat

by Marion Nestle, Basic Books



THE fortified chocolate milk Fifth Quarter Fresh helps “high school football players improve their cognitive and motor function...

even after experiencing concussion”, said a University of Maryland press release in 2015.

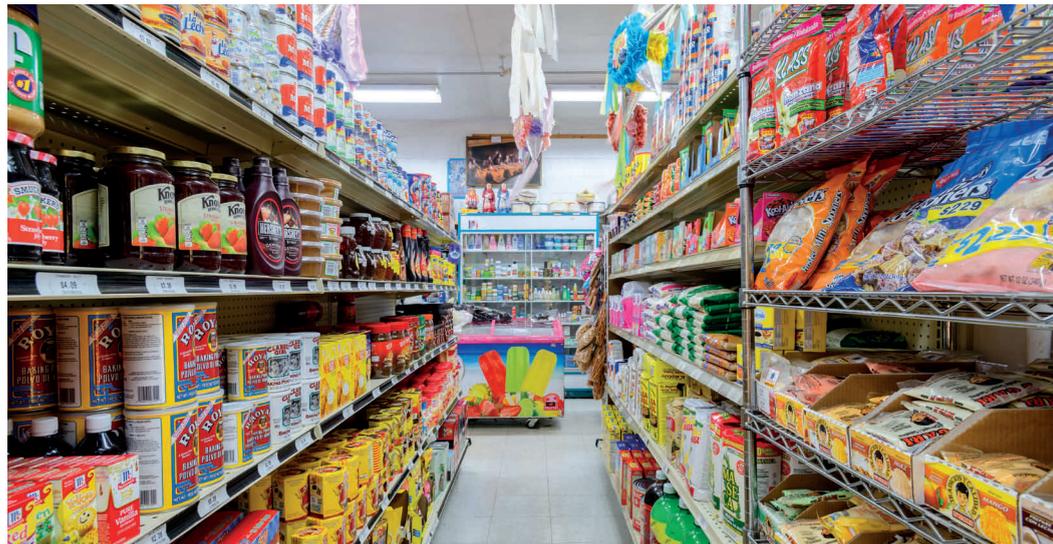
The release referred to a poorly designed, unpublished study, the results of which most scientists would consider statistically insignificant. The study was initiated and part-funded by the makers of... Fifth Quarter Fresh.

This is no isolated case of marketing disguised as nutrition science but one of the examples in *Unsavory Truth*, where best-selling author and academic Marion Nestle unpicks the ways food and drinks firms use researchers to manipulate science, influence policy and boost sales. She cites many examples, notably food giant Mars funding over 150 studies on the supposed health benefits of chocolate and its components.

Unsurprisingly, industry-backed nutrition studies are much more likely to produce results favourable to the backers. While such research can be done with independence and integrity, it usually isn't, says Nestle.

Using and abusing science is far from unique to “big food”. It was a tobacco industry tactic to fight health concerns over its products, copied by the likes of big pharma.

Food company-funded studies, says Nestle, often highlight the



non-existent health benefits of ingredients by failing to control for the other possible causes of the upside they are claiming. Such trials often lack randomisation or appropriate comparisons. They can give a positive spin to results showing no effect, and fail to publish negative results.

Away from research in industry, academics with financial ties to the sector often regard the idea that they favour their sponsors as an attack on their integrity. And yet, Nestle writes, psychologists have shown that there are

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“unintentional, unconscious and unrecognised” effects on scientists from gifts and funding.

Industry-funded studies are published in leading nutrition journals. Nestle disagrees with the idea that simply giving conflicts

of interests deals with them.

Big food also funds professional bodies, explains Nestle, including the American Society for Nutrition, which has taken industry-friendly positions on processed foods. The industry has links to the International Life Science Institute, which calls itself a “non-profit, scientific foundation” but questioned limits on added sugar.

Nestle is on stronger ground when outlining the corporate capture of nutrition science than when she proposes solutions to it. These become a tussle between her optimist and pessimist selves. The best way to avoid conflicts of interest is to refuse corporate cash, she writes, however she recognises this is hard, as competition for public funds is fierce. She likes a colleague's idea of a “Journal for Industry-Funded Research” for all corporate-backed studies, but won't hold her breath.

Above all, Nestle wants research wrested out of corporate hands.

Questionable claims about food can be used as a way to boost sales

Her ultimate solution is for it to be funded through a tax payable by all food and drinks companies. Again, she knows the prospect of this happening in the US is zero. You sense despair as she writes that other compromises may be worth trying “if anyone... can come up with a good one”.

Yet Nestle pulls herself up off the canvas to issue a final call. Journalists must make it clear when research is industry funded. Or actually read the studies they cover. Consumers need to know health benefits are more likely to be linked to than caused by single foods. Voters must tell politicians that vendors of unhealthy foods and drinks make bad advisers. If we don't demand healthier, more sustainable, ethical food, Nestle asks, who will? ■

Nic Fleming is a science writer based in Bristol, UK