Olympic Error

Soft drinks likely contribute to obesity more than any other single food or beverage. And obesity increases the risk of diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and cancers of the breast, colon, esophagus, kidney, and uterus.

So why is Coca-Cola the major corporate sponsor of the Vancouver 2010 Olympics? In fact, Coca-Cola has been a "corporate partner" of the Olympics since the 1928 Amsterdam Games. And that will remain the case at least through 2020, says the company.

Ironically, British Columbia health officials pledged to make BC the healthiest location to ever host an Olympics. After all, it’s the only province to get trans fat out of restaurants and may be the first to require calorie labelling on restaurant menus. (It didn’t do too well on the smoking front, though. Thanks to objections from several international sport federations, the “smoke-free” Olympics ended up with “designated outdoor smoking areas” for coaches and officials.)

Here’s why the Coke-Olympics connection is so harmful.

The underfunded World Health Organization is trying to help countries trim the human and economic costs of diet-related disease. Some ideas are percolating: national sport federations, the “smoke-free” approach to restaurant menus. And that will remain the case at least through 2020, says the company.

The company scored a steady stream of media attention as the Coca-Cola torch, accompanied by free Cokes and Coca-Cola paraphernalia, passed through every province in the westward trek to Whistler.

At the games, Coca-Cola was able to sell its drinks to a captive audience of 5,000 athletes and 1.85 million ticket-holding spectators. Add to that the unparalleled advertising opportunity, as billions of eyes across the globe were trained on athletic events over a fortnight.

Coca-Cola is under attack from health experts in North America and elsewhere for promoting obesity, so the company is willing to pay big bucks to associate its brand with athleticism, clean living, and health. Using the talented athletes as bait, Coca-Cola has no doubt convinced millions of children, in Canada and around the world, that it is a responsible, health-conscious corporate citizen.

As Coca-Cola’s ads were being drummed into people’s heads at every opportunity, did you hear anything about soft drinks’ contribution to obesity, or the tooth-eroding effect of pop, or the health benefits of drinking tap water? Didn’t think so.

Too bad the IOC doesn’t recognize the inconsistency of having a global junk-food peddler sponsor the Olympics. What’s next? The La-Z-Boy Games of 2012? The Seagram Games of 2014?

“Coke adds life,” goes the marketing slogan. They got their math wrong. Coca-Cola doesn’t add it. Subtracts.

Michael F. Jacobson, PhD
Executive Director
Centre for Science in the Public Interest

The Centre for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) is the non-profit health-advocacy group that publishes Nutrition Action Healthletter. CSPI mounts educational programs and presses for changes in government and corporate policies.

The use of information from Nutrition Action Healthletter for commercial purposes is prohibited without written permission from CSPI.

© 2010 by Centre for Science in the Public Interest.

The contents of NAH are not intended to provide medical advice, which should be obtained from a qualified health professional. Design and production by The Page Group (www.pagegroup.com).

MARCH 2010
Volume 37 Number 2

STAFF

EDITORIAL
Michael Jacobson, PhD
Executive Editor
Bonnie Liebman, MS
Director of Nutrition
Stephen B. Schmidt
Editor-in-Chief
Jayne Hurley, RD
David Schardt
Senior Nutritionists
Kate Sherwood
Kathryn Wiseman
Laurie S. Lampert
Lauren Clark, RD
Damon Dorsey
Mary McKenna, PhD, RD
Marsha Rosen, RD
Jeffery, LLB
Bill Jeffery, LLB
Consultant (Ottawa)
National Coordinator (Ottawa)

CIRCULATION MANAGEMENT
Dennis Bass
Debra Brink
Damon Dorsey
Louella Fennell
Greg Hildebrandt
James Nocera
Karl Saastad
Ken Waldmiller

SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY BOARD
Monique Julier, MD, DrPH
Université de Montréal
Montreal, Quebec

Mary McKenna, PhD, RD
University of New Brunswick
Fredericton, New Brunswick

Andrew Pipe, CM, MD, LLID, DSc
University of Ottawa Heart Institute
Ottawa, Ontario

Kim Raine, PhD, RD
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta

Frank Sacks, MD
Harvard Medical School
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Jeremiah Stamler, MD
Northwestern University Medical School
Chicago, Illinois

Norman Temple, PhD
Althabasca University
Althabasca, Alberta

Regina G. Ziegler, PhD, MPH
U.S. National Cancer Institute
Bethesda, Maryland

Nutrition Action Healthletter (ISSN 0885-7792) is published 10 times a year (monthly except bi-monthly in Jan./Feb. and Jul./Aug.).

SUBSCRIBER SERVICES
The cost for a one-year subscription or gift (10 issues) is $36; two years are $66 (GST/HST included). Mail to P.O. Box 4252, Toronto M4S 3B4. For bulk subscriptions, please write for details. To change your address, send us your subscriber number and your old and new addresses four weeks before you move. If you don’t want us to exchange your name, send us your name and mailing-label information. Fax: (202) 265-4954. E-mail: circ@cspinet.org. World Wide Web: www.cspinet.org. Expiry date is in the upper corner of your mailing label. Your subscriber number precedes the expiry date. GUARANTEE! We’ll give you 2 FREE ISSUES if there’s ever a problem with your subscription.

PUBLICATIONS MAIL AGREEMENT NO. 40017740
RETURN UNDELIVERABLE CANADIAN ADDRESSES TO
CENTRE FOR SCIENCE IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST
P.O. BOX 4252, POSTAL STATION A
TORONTO, ONTARIO M5W 5M4

e-mail: circ@cspinet.org

EMO FROM MFJ