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Commentary

Promoting physical activity and healthy eating: Convergence in framing the role of industry

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ABSTRACT

This commentary addresses a little explored aspect of prevention, namely, how public health practitioners conceptualize the roles of industries whose business interests may be at odds with physical activity and eating nutrient-rich foods. Taking their cues from successful campaigns in tobacco control, many public health advocates have framed obesity as a battle with the food industry. Such framing presents problems when it exacerbates existing tensions between practitioners in nutrition and physical activity, and alienates potential fitness industry partners. Creating healthy environments requires reframing expectations of all industries that influence physical activity and inactivity. A broader view of the influence of corporate practices on physical and social environments will help both physical activity and nutrition advocates identify what they can do together, and in partnership with the business sector, to create environments that promote activity and nutritious eating.

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Introduction

Good nutrition and regular physical activity are both necessary for preventing chronic disease. Policy analysts have proposed that the public health campaign to control tobacco can inform efforts to prevent chronic disease (Davey, 2004, Dorfman et al., 2005, Mercer et al., 2003). One aspect of this perspective frames the battle against obesity as public health versus the food industry (Kersh and Morone, 2002, Mello et al., 2003). Such framing presents problems when it: 1) exacerbates existing tensions between nutrition and physical activity; 2) reinforces individually-focused, rather than environmentally-focused, prevention approaches; 3) casts private industry culpability too narrowly; and (4) alienates potential fitness industry partners that may be reluctant to be associated with controversy. A more comprehensive view of the influence of corporate practices on physical and social environments will help both physical activity and nutrition advocates identify what they can do together, and in partnership with business, to create environments that support activity and nutritious eating.

Tensions exist between nutrition and physical activity

There is an historical imbalance in public health toward nutrition and away from physical activity. While nutrition has been part of the public health infrastructure since its inception in the mid-1800s

(Yancey et al., 2007), exercise science is a newcomer. Physical activity promotion did not explicitly appear among the core functions of public health until 1993, and few schools of public health or local health departments have physical activity programs (Novick, 2001). The California Department of Health Services, for example, only recently increased the number of positions available to address physical activity among more than 36 million residents. Consequently, attention to physical activity has often been assigned by default to nutrition staff who may have little interest or training in the subject. Additionally, the cultures of nutrition and exercise science sometimes clash. Disinterest in competitive sports may be normative among nutrition professionals, mostly women. Desire for nutrient-rich foods is not uncommon in activity promotion circles populated mostly by male former athletes. For example, an ESPN radio ad bragged, "We're the prime rib on a dial full of tofu!" (2006). Especially in tight economic times, nutrition staff in public health departments and community organizations may view physical activity promotion as competition for scarce resources.

Food industry tactics can exacerbate tensions between nutrition and physical activity

Many food companies have responded to attacks on their marketing by publicizing their efforts to promote physical activity (Berkeley Media Studies Group, 2007). Companies like McDonalds highlight physical activity by featuring snowboarding or beach volleyball in advertisements for hamburgers and French fries. This, in turn, has created a competitive backlash by some public health nutrition advocacy groups, which argue that healthy eating is more important than physical

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activity in stemming obesity (Public Health Institute, 2004). Adopting tobacco control tactics that demonize the food industry, some nutrition groups discount food industry physical activity promotion efforts as disingenuous public relations ploys designed to avoid scrutiny and regulation or taxation (Rigby et al., 2004).

Taking the opposite view, physical activity proponents, already a minority in public health circles and hungry for resources, are likely to welcome any effort to promote physical activity, despite the public relations benefits disproportionate to corporate investment that are assailed by some nutrition advocates. These opposing viewpoints of food industry behavior can exacerbate pre-existing tension between the fields of nutrition and physical activity.

Food industry's physical activity promotions reinforce the least effective approaches to prevention

Food industry support for physical activity is focused at the individual level (Mayer, 2005), as opposed to the policy or environmental level which would be more effective and sustainable. Food industry campaigns do this by making modest contributions to local physical activity programs and by over-emphasizing the contribution of physical inactivity to obesity and chronic disease in ways that reinforce individualized versions of disease etiology.

Overall, company spokespeople do this by talking about “choice” and “balance.” The emphasis on choice both absolves companies of responsibility for the accessibility of those choices and reinforces the inherently American belief that individuals are solely responsible for and in control of their own health, obfuscating the context in which the choices are made. Food companies' promotion of physical activity in their marketing, sponsorships, and philanthropy focuses on individual behavior rather than changing environments. Typical are playground equipment purchases and public education campaigns encouraging active recreation and admonishing families to make good choices without regard to the physical and social circumstances that limit those choices. The emphasis on such individualized approaches is further complicated by the fact that the communities most at risk have the fewest opportunities for physical activity (Powell et al. 2009).

Many industries are implicated in chronic disease etiology

The focus on the food industry is the reasonable consequence of embracing lessons from tobacco control and of chronic disease prevention's roots in nutrition. However, if public health advocates stop there, they will miss the larger picture of how environments are shaped to either promote or compromise health. Many other corporate interests have contributed to the escalation of chronic disease, such as those promoting automobile-centered transportation (e.g., highway construction companies; oil, tire, and automobile manufacturers and retailers) and sedentary entertainment (television and film industries, video game manufacturers, video/DVD rental companies, and spectator sports). Yet little attention to date has been paid to scrutinizing or implicating these industries.

These companies may, like their food industry counterparts, also contribute to chronic disease disparities. Yancey et al. (2009) found that lower income black and Latino communities besieged by outdoor sugary beverage and nutrient-poor fast food advertising are also beset by television, film and automobile ads. Narrowly focusing on the food industry may truncate investigation into the potential policy approaches for ameliorating harmful health effects of other industries.

A 2005 Institute of Medicine invitation to an industry roundtable on childhood obesity shows how few inroads public health advocates have made in drawing attention to sedentary behavior-promoting industries' culpability. These companies were not among the food, beverage, restaurant, leisure, recreation, and entertainment

industries represented, in stark contrast to the high profile of soda manufacturers and fast food retailers who promoted their product reformulations to cut calories, fat, and portion sizes. The only physical activity-related industries in attendance were sports apparel manufacturing and physical videogaming (Institute of Medicine, 2006).

Private industry can support environmental changes that would increase physical activity at the population level. But large-scale expansion of locations to engage in physical activity such as bike lanes, parks, and playgrounds will require substantial public funding. Food companies spent more than \$23 million lobbying in 2008 and their marketing budgets are in the billions (Center for Responsive Politics, 2008). Advocates could reconsider their criticism of the food industry, for example, if companies stopped their harmful marketing practices and used their heft in Washington DC to encourage broad scale environmentally-focused physical activity promotion such as supporting public transit, physical education and structural integration of physical activity into workplace routines (Besser and Dannenberg, 2005; Yancey et al., 2007).

Conclusion: reframe industry relationships to physical activity and public health

Creating healthy environments requires participation from all sectors of society, including private industry. Reframing attitudes toward and expectations of all the industries that influence physical activity will take time and require multiple leverage points. Furthermore, the profits of sports and fitness industries, unlike food, will likely increase with population activity participation. A broader conceptualization of the role of industry could foster prevention efforts that would address both nutrition and physical activity. Public health advocates should work to expose the harmful practices of all industries and to direct the contributions of corporations endeavoring to be “part of the solution” in ways that benefit the broadest population.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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