

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Is Captured by Big Food

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✓ Fact Checked

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (AND) is more akin to an industry front group than a public health agency
- › AND, the U.S. “authority” on food policy, which influences the development of U.S. dietary guidelines, has close ties to the manufacturers of some of the unhealthiest foods you can eat, including Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, General Mills and Kraft
- › AND received millions of dollars from companies in the food, pharmaceutical and agribusiness industries and “had policies to provide favors and benefits in return”
- › AND and its foundation even invested in ultraprocessed food and pharmaceutical companies
- › AND leaders have acted as employees of or consultants for multinational food, pharmaceutical and agribusiness corporations
- › In its present state, AND is unable to offer sound dietary advice and, on the contrary, is likely doing the opposite

Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a public health agency whose primary purpose was to advise people on how to eat right? Assuming, of course, that it advocated for foods that are actually health-promoting. Hippocrates was right on when he said, “Let food be thy medicine and let medicine be thy food.”

There are few elements of good health that are as powerful as consuming pure, nutrient-dense whole foods. Harnessing this power for a population, via education about what

foods to eat for disease prevention, energy, sleep and positive mood, for starters, would have priceless benefits.

Well, there is such an agency in the U.S. It's the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (AND), which claims to be "your source for science-based food and nutrition information."¹

Somewhere along the way, however, AND lost its way — if it ever was on the right path to begin with. Much like other entities in charge of public health that have been captured by industry, AND is captured by Big Food and Big Pharma. In its present state, it's unable to offer sound dietary advice and, on the contrary, is likely doing the opposite.

For anyone getting nutrition consultations from one of AND's more than 100,000 credentialed dietitians and nutrition practitioners,² as well as AND students, this eye-opening information must be heeded to protect your health.

AND Is Tied to Ultraprocessed Junk Food Companies

AND, the U.S. "authority" on food policy, which influences the development of U.S. dietary guidelines, has uncomfortably close ties to the manufacturers of some of the unhealthiest foods you can eat. This includes Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, General Mills and Kraft, among others.³

The finding came from a five-year investigation conducted by public health scholars and U.S. Right to Know. Published in Public Health Nutrition in October 2022, the analysis included documents from 2014 to 2020 obtained through freedom of information requests.⁴ The results? A symbiotic relationship was revealed between AND, the AND Foundation (ANDF) and corporations, which assist AND and its foundation with financial contributions.

Not surprisingly, AND acts as a pro-industry voice as a result,⁵ one that cannot, in this capacity, represent the best interests of Americans' health. According to the study:⁶

“The AND, AND Foundation (ANDF) and its key leaders have ongoing interactions with corporations. These include AND’s leaders holding key positions in multinational food, pharmaceutical or agribusiness corporations, and AND accepting corporate financial contributions.

We found the AND has invested funds in corporations such as Nestlé, PepsiCo and pharmaceutical companies, has discussed internal policies to fit industry needs and has had public positions favoring corporations.”

Internal Communications Reveal a Captured Academy

The internal communications reviewed by the team reveal an Academy that’s more akin to an industry front group than a public health agency. Some of the most egregious findings include the following, reported by U.S. Right to Know:⁷

- AND received millions of dollars from companies in the food, pharmaceutical and agribusiness industries. In exchange for these gifts, AND “had policies to provide favors and benefits in return.”
- AND and ANDF invested in ultraprocessed food and pharmaceutical companies.
- AND leaders have acted as employees of or consultants for multinational food, pharmaceutical and agribusiness corporations.
- AND discusses policies to “fit the needs of its food, agribusiness and pharmaceutical industry sponsors.”

Specifically, from 2011 to 2017, AND received more than \$4 million in donations from junk food and ultraprocessed food companies like Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Nestlé, Hershey, Kellogg’s and Conagra.⁸ If that wasn’t bad enough, they also invested in junk food industries, blatantly supporting the very corporations at the root of failing public health in the U.S. In one example from 2015 and 2016, AND had stock in PepsiCo, Nestlé and J.M. Smucker valued at more than \$1 million.⁹

Several pharmaceutical companies, including Abbott, Johnson & Johnson, Perrigo Co, Pfizer Inc., Allegra and Merck & Co., also made the cut for AND's stock portfolio in 2015.¹⁰ What business does AND, whose website, ironically, is eatright.org, have in accepting money from the industries it should be admonishing? And worse yet, investing in them?

In a statement, AND addressed the investigation as a “calculated attack” against their credentialed nutrition and dietetics practitioners, and stated, “There is no scientific rigor in the methodology and the data is presented without context.”¹¹

However, this isn't the first time AND has been accused of being a puppet for industry. In 2013, a report in Eat Drink Politics asked, “Are America's nutrition professionals in the pocket of big food?”¹² Its findings echoed the current report, showing that not much has changed in the last near decade.

“The food industry's deep infiltration of the nation's top nutrition organization raises serious questions not only about that profession's credibility, but also about its policy positions,” the 2013 report stated. Some of its findings at the time clearly showed where AND's priorities lie:¹³

From 2001 to 2011, AND had a more than three-fold increase in food industry sponsors

Processed food makers Conagra, General Mills and Kellogg were among their most loyal sponsors

AND's approved list of continuing education providers included Coca-Cola, Kraft Foods, Nestlé and PepsiCo

Coca-Cola-sponsored continuing education courses taught that sugar is not harmful to children, aspartame is safe for children and the Institute of Medicine is too restrictive in its school nutrition standards

At AND's 2012 annual meeting, 18 organizations, making up less than 5% of its

exhibitors, had 25% of exhibitor space; 16 of those organizations represented processed food; only 12% of exhibitor space was granted to fruit and vegetable vendors

The Corn Refiners Association (aka, lobbyists for high fructose corn syrup) sponsored multiple “expo impact” sessions at AND’s 2012 annual meeting

Of the speakers at the annual meeting, 23% had industry ties, most of which were not disclosed

Junk Food Sponsors Are the Norm at AND

Chronic conditions like Type 2 diabetes, heart disease and obesity have a lot in common, including the fact that they’re often fueled by poor diet. Ultraprocessed foods, junk foods and soft drinks are key culprits in the rise of such chronic diseases that have become the bane of the U.S. population.

Multinational food and beverage corporations have long interfered with public policy and influenced the development of dietary guidelines. In order to protect public health, this conflicted influence must be curbed, according to a report published by the campaign group Corporate Accountability.¹⁴

Yet, the 2022 report found that in the years 2011 and 2013 to 2017, AND accepted more than \$15 million from corporations and organizations. Top contributors included the National Dairy Council, Conagra, Abbott Nutrition, Abbott Labs, PepsiCo, Coca-Cola, Hershey and General Mills.¹⁵ Here’s a further breakdown of their corporate contributors from those years:¹⁶

National Dairy Council \$1,496,912	Conagra Inc. \$1,414,058
Abbott Nutrition \$1,246,389	Abbott Laboratories \$824,110
Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics	PepsiCo Inc. \$486,335

Foundation: \$801,261	
Coca-Cola Co. \$477,577	Hershey Co. \$368,032
General Mills Inc. \$309,733	Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality \$296,495
Aramark Co. \$293,051	Unilever Best Foods \$276,791
Kellogg USA \$273,272	

AND's foundation also accepts sizeable corporate gifts, including more than \$2 million from 2011 to 2014, which was about one-third of its revenue for that period. In 2015, corporate donations accounted for more than 62% of ANDF's revenue.¹⁷

It's not clear which corporations are top contributors in 2022, as AND is not as fully transparent as it claims to be. However, U.S. Right to Know reported several current financial ties, including:¹⁸

- The candy industry's National Confectioners Association
- Pesticide manufacturer Bayer CropScience
- Tate & Lyle, which produces sugar and manufactures sucralose (Splenda)
- Abbott

Your Health Is at Stake

Much is at stake when the agencies influencing dietary guidelines are cozied up to the makers of ultraprocessed foods, which underlie the greatest health challenges facing the U.S. As U.S. Right to Know reported:¹⁹

"Recent studies provide strong evidence that ultra-processed foods are increasing rates of cardiovascular disease, Type 2 diabetes, weight gain and obesity, cancer, dementia, and – most alarmingly – all-cause mortality. Yet

many people are confused about the health risks of ultra-processed foods, primarily because they are deliberately misled by ultra-processed food and chemical companies that profit from an industrial food system.

There is also extensive evidence showing how food and beverage corporations influence science and policy efforts aimed at protecting health and well-being. One key strategy is to capture and use health professionals and health institutions as vehicles to achieve their policy goals.”

If you want to learn more, U.S. Right to Know has coauthored more than a dozen studies that illustrate how the food and agrichemical industries have captured media, regulators and policy makers to the detriment of public health.²⁰

In April 2021, for instance, they released a case study of the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI),²¹ a not-for-profit organization established by a Coca-Cola executive more than 40 years ago.²² Corporate Accountability’s report also revealed that more than half of those appointed to the 2020 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC) had ties to ILSI.²³

DGAC is supposed to be an independent committee, which reviews scientific evidence and provides a report to help develop the next set of dietary guidelines for Americans. However, its extensive ties to ILSI all but ensure the committee is anything but independent.

ILSI has been exposed as a shill for the junk food industry and internal documents revealed ILSI embedded itself in public health panels across Europe and the United Nations in an effort to promote its own industry-focused agenda to raise profits at the expense of public health worldwide.²⁴

Seek the Truth From Those Who Put Health Ahead of Profits

This is just one example, but to give an idea of how deeply embedded internal policies that favor corporate ties are at AND, consider this: The 2022 investigation found that, in

2015, AND updated its “Guidelines for Corporate Sponsors” to require sponsorship to comply with principles developed by ILSI.²⁵

It’s clear that if you’re truly interested in protecting your health, AND and its registered dietitians are not the place to get your information. Rather than relying on an Academy that’s supported financially by industry giants making products that cause disease, seek the truth from those who put human health ahead of profits.

As it stands, and has for some time, the investigation explained, “AND and corporations interact symbiotically. This sets a precedent for close corporate relationships with the food and nutrition profession in the USA, which may negatively affect the public health agenda in the USA and internationally.”²⁶

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