On October 6, 2009, the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) proudly announced a new corporate relationship with the Coca-Cola company for supporting patient education about healthy eating on the AAFP’s public Web site, FamilyDoctor.org.

I could scarcely believe my eyes when I saw this declaration. Coke and the Academy? Purveyors of some of the least healthy substances on the planet in alliance with the organization that represents me as a promoter of health to my patients? How could this be?

I sent an e-mail to Doug Henley, MD, the Academy’s executive vice president, asking how such an absurd and dangerous liaison could be condoned. He said the AAFP needed to find sources of non-dues revenue in this difficult economic time and that the Board had considered this financial relationship with Coca-Cola for 18 months. He also said that this alliance was not without precedent, as the AAFP has had corporate relationships with Pepsi and McDonald’s for some time to support the AAFP Americans in Motion (AIM) program. He further stated that AAFP content editors would have full control over the information provided on the FamilyDoctor.org Web site.

Dr Henley also told me that even the American Dietetic Association (ADA) has made a policy statement that “There are no good or bad foods” and that people just need to make healthy eating choices. He referred me to a Web site (www.healthyweightcommit.org) supported by such venerable organizations as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJ) that promotes “energy balance” as a way to stay healthy. In other words, as long as you burn enough calories, you can balance whatever you eat to keep a healthy weight. The corporate partners in this Web site include numerous food and beverage companies, grocery store chains, etc.

In essence, Dr Henley’s defense to concerns about whether Coca-Cola is a suitable partner for AAFP is that we are in good company with RWJ, ADA, and others and that it is exciting for the AAFP to be in the middle of this new discussion about helping stem the obesity epidemic in America.

Is this what we have been reduced to as a specialty? To justify an unholy financial alliance we hide behind what others say and do and deny that there are actually unhealthy “bad” foods? I wonder how much money the ADA receives from the Coca-Cola Company and other food and beverage companies to have come up with this counter-intuitive “no good or bad foods” philosophy?

There is ample evidence that the specific molecules ingested in one’s diet act as messengers to the cells and create biochemical changes, completely apart from their caloric content. Good health is not based simply on a healthy weight, as the ADA statement would indicate, but that every cell in the body is receiving healthy messages so that cellular processes can proceed properly.

The public knows there are foods they really should avoid. Tom Frieden, MD, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, asserts that sugar-sweetened beverages may be the single largest driver of the obesity epidemic in children and adults, despite assertions by the CEO of Coca-Cola to the contrary in the Wall Street Journal. In their hearts, my guess is that members of the AAFP Board of Directors know all of this as well. But I think the quiet questioning voice inside each person involved in this decision to affiliate with the Coca-Cola Company has been silenced by what might be called “group think”—the loud voices of rationalization that can justify this alliance because, really, we need this money. Those loud voices convince themselves and the others around the table that it is all acceptable.
To me and many others, it is not acceptable at all. This fiscal affiliation to promote health education with an industry built upon producing unhealthy non-foods is akin to accepting tobacco funding for smoking cessation—which the AAFP rejected years ago. Or, it is similar to taking money from the alcohol industry to promote not driving while drinking. Alcohol, tobacco, and firearms are all listed by the AAFP as types of entities from which we will not affiliate or accept funding. Contributors to the obesity epidemic, such as fast foods and sugary soft drinks, should be added to this list.

In this time of health care reform, perhaps we need to reform our own Academy. Difficult times require real leadership. It is harder to let the quiet inner voices be heard when the economic pressures seem so great. But the American public, government, other health-related groups, and yes, even ourselves, will have much more respect and admiration for the AAFP if it publicly announced that its policy on funding has changed, and it is returning the money offered by the Coca-Cola Company to promote health education. Otherwise, we are health promotion hypocrites.

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References