

## VIEWS &amp; REVIEWS

## NO HOLDS BARRED

## Is Coca-Cola's antiobesity scheme the real thing?

Margaret McCartney *general practitioner, Glasgow*

The soft drinks manufacturer Coca-Cola is offering to halt the scourge of obesity in its tracks. The Coca-Cola Zero ParkLives scheme—launched last year as a pilot in Birmingham—offers running, cycling, rounders, tai chi, and bushcraft.

The scheme, which Coca-Cola describes as “ground breaking,” is now to be extended to 50 parks in three English cities. It will cost the company £20m between now and 2020,<sup>1</sup> and the aim is further expansion. Coca-Cola introduced the scheme because it wants “to play a more productive role in finding solutions to obesity.”<sup>2</sup>

Local councils seem to have signed up willingly, advertising the scheme on their websites—including the red Coca-Cola logo.<sup>3</sup>

Since when did public health policy on mass activity get placed in the lap of large soft drinks companies? Combined sales of the sugar free varieties of Coke don't outpace the full sugar version, and total sales are worth £1bn a year in the UK alone.<sup>4</sup> Coca-Cola has made its desire for growth clear: “Our research reveals that there is a £2.1 billion opportunity to grow the soft drinks category, including £793 million of incremental sales that can be unlocked by delivering just one more soft drink ‘moment’ per household per week.”<sup>5</sup> The £20m the company has pledged is thus but small change.

A can of sugar sweetened Coke has 139 calories, which would take 30 minutes of walking to expend.<sup>6</sup> How can selling such products be compatible with an aim to reduce obesity? Coke is not part of the solution; it is part of the problem.

The company clearly wants to associate itself with the antiobesity zeitgeist, but if Coca-Cola wanted to do something more useful it could cut the amount of sugar in its products.

In 2009, the Advertising Standards Authority upheld my complaint about Vitamin Water, a product that Coca-Cola claimed had health benefits despite containing 23g of sugar in each 500 mL bottle (about a quarter of the daily recommended amount).<sup>7</sup>

And in 2011, the authority upheld complaints about claims that the same product was “enhanced hydration for the nation—delicious and nutritious.”<sup>8</sup> In 2012 Coca-Cola reformulated Vitamin Water, and it now contains 30% fewer calories<sup>9</sup>—still 65 calories in every 500 mL more than water.

If a massive business wants to give money to local communities, it should do it quietly, and certainly with no advertising being given in exchange. As for exercise organised in local parks, how sure can we be that this represents “solutions to obesity” at all?

We urgently need to find and apply the evidence for how to make regular physical activity easy and accessible to all. Its ParkLives scheme allows Coca-Cola to tick the boxes for corporate social responsibility, but in actuality it is just clever advertising. Local councils should insist that the cash comes free of adverts—or not at all.

Follow Margaret McCartney on Twitter, @mgmtmccartney

Competing interests: I have read and understood the BMJ Group policy on declaration of interests and declare the following interests: I'm an NHS GP partner, with income partly dependant on QOF points. I'm a part time undergraduate tutor at the University of Glasgow. I've authored a book and earned from broadcast and written freelance journalism. I'm unpaid patron of Healthwatch. I make a monthly donation to Keep Our NHS Public. I'm a member of MedAct. I'm occasionally paid for time, travel, and accommodation to give talks or have locum fees paid to allow me to give talks but never for any drug or public relations company. I was elected to the national council of the Royal College of General Practitioners in 2013.

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- 1 National free parks activity to launch in Birmingham. Birmingham News Room, 26/5/14. <http://birminghamnewsroom.com/2014/05/national-free-parks-activity-programme-to-launch-in-birmingham/>
- 2 Coca-cola accused of “obscene” hypocrisy in 20million ‘anti-obesity’ drive. Independent, 26/5/14 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/cocacola-accused-of-obscene-hypocrisy-in-20m-antiobesity-drive-9434618.html>
- 3 Newham London. Coca-Cola Zero ParkLives. <http://www.newham.gov.uk/Pages/ServiceChild/Coca-Cola-Zero-ParkLives.aspx>
- 4 Which is your bestselling brand, Coca-Cola or Diet Coke? <http://www.coca-cola.co.uk/faq/products/which-is-your-bestselling-brand-coca-cola-or-diet-coke.html>
- 5 Coca-cola Enterprises Ltd. Our business. <http://www.cokecce.co.uk/about-us/our-business.aspx>
- 6 Coca Cola Work it out. <http://www.coca-cola.co.uk/health/work-it-out-calculator.html>
- 7 ASA Adjudication on Coca-Cola Great Britain. 7/10/2009. [http://www.asa.org.uk/Rulings/Adjudications/2009/10/Coca\\_Cola-Great-Britain/TF\\_ADJ\\_47037.aspx](http://www.asa.org.uk/Rulings/Adjudications/2009/10/Coca_Cola-Great-Britain/TF_ADJ_47037.aspx)
- 8 ASA Adjudication on Coca-Cola Great Britain. 27/04/11. [http://www.asa.org.uk/Rulings/Adjudications/2011/4/Coca\\_Cola-Great-Britain/TF\\_ADJ\\_50308.aspx](http://www.asa.org.uk/Rulings/Adjudications/2011/4/Coca_Cola-Great-Britain/TF_ADJ_50308.aspx)
- 9 Coca-cola Great Britain. Glaceau. Brands. <http://www.coca-cola.co.uk/brands/category/glacau.html>

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