

Sponsorship of National Health Organizations by Two Major Soda Companies



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Introduction: Obesity is a pervasive public health problem in the U.S. Reducing soda consumption is important for stemming the obesity epidemic. However, several articles and one book suggest that soda companies are using their resources to impede public health interventions that might reduce soda consumption. Although corporate sponsorship by tobacco and alcohol companies has been studied extensively, there has been no systematic attempt to catalog sponsorship activities of soda companies. This study investigates the nature, extent, and implications of soda company sponsorship of U.S. health and medical organizations, as well as corporate lobbying expenditures on soda- or nutrition-related public health legislation from 2011 to 2015.

Methods: Records of corporate philanthropy and lobbying expenditures on public health legislation by soda companies in the U.S. during 2011–2015 were found through Internet and database searches.

Results: From 2011 to 2015, the Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo were found to sponsor a total of 95 national health organizations, including many medical and public health institutions whose specific missions include fighting the obesity epidemic. During the study period, these two soda companies lobbied against 29 public health bills intended to reduce soda consumption or improve nutrition.

Conclusions: There is surprisingly pervasive sponsorship of national health and medical organizations by the nation's two largest soda companies. These companies lobbied against public health intervention in 97% of cases, calling into question a sincere commitment to improving the public's health. By accepting funding from these companies, health organizations are inadvertently participating in their marketing plans.

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INTRODUCTION

The U.S. has one of the highest rates of obesity in the world.^{1,2} In 2008, obesity overtook smoking as the largest preventable cause of the loss of quality-adjusted life years.³ In 2012, 35% of American adults were obese and 69% were overweight or obese.^{4,5} In the same year, the U.S. spent an estimated \$190 billion treating conditions tied to obesity, or 20.6% of health expenditures.⁶ One factor behind the American obesity epidemic is soda consumption. The average American consumed 46 gallons of soda in 2009, giving the U.S. one of the highest rates of per capita soda consumption of any country.^{7,8} About half of Americans drink sugary drinks every day.^{9,10} Recently, it has been estimated that soda

consumption caused one fifth of weight gain in the U.S. between 1977 and 2007.¹¹ Therefore, finding ways to reduce soda consumption is important for improving public health and stemming chronic illnesses associated with soda consumption, such as obesity.

Health and medical organizations would naturally be expected to promote policies that reduce soda consumption.

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However, it has been documented that a number of health organizations have retreated from this responsibility by withdrawing from public debate on policies to reduce soda consumption, opposing soda legislation, or actually collaborating with soda companies to produce joint educational materials.^{12–15} It has been suggested that the reason many health organizations support corporate goals, even at the expense of public health, is that they derive funding from these corporations.¹⁶ It is believed these sponsorships can affect the actions and voices of health organizations.^{12,13} Further, organizations may feel pressured to grant sponsors conference spots, which allow soda companies to present and speak at important health conferences and develop positive associations.¹⁷ As to why companies choose to sponsor national health initiatives, this has been explored by Rosenberg and Siegel¹⁸ in 2001: possibilities include brand awareness, positive brand associations, enhanced corporate image, and influence over social attitudes about the health impacts of a product.

The use of corporate sponsorship of health organizations by tobacco and alcohol companies to quell potential support for tobacco or alcohol control policies has been well documented.^{18–20} Although the extent of sponsorship of health organizations by alcohol and tobacco companies has been well characterized, there has not been a systematic attempt to do so for soda companies. Several articles and one book have provided examples of such sponsorships,^{12,13,15,21,22} but a comprehensive analysis that identifies the nature and extent of these sponsorships is needed.

This study systematically identifies, describes, and analyzes the nature and extent of soda company sponsorship of health and medical organizations in the U.S. during the 5-year period from 2011 to 2015. It also examines the lobbying efforts of these companies to influence legislation designed to prevent obesity, in order to determine whether acceptance of funding from these companies is consistent with the mission of the sponsored organizations.

METHODS

Identification of Sponsorships

This study used a systematic approach to identify sponsorships of health organizations by the Coca-Cola Company, PepsiCo, or both between 2011 and 2015. A “health organization” was defined as a group, entity, or program involved in the public’s health. Internet searches were conducted on Google for the terms *Coca-Cola* and *Pepsi* along with the terms *health*, *physicians*, *doctors*, *nurses*, *sponsorship*, *funding*, *corporate partner*, *nonprofit*, *organization*, and *philanthropy*. These search terms were inspired by similar studies on alcohol and tobacco sponsorships.^{18,20} For organizations that appeared in searches, the websites were scoured for evidence of sponsorship. Additionally, a thorough literature search

was completed, which yielded many papers with scattered references to sponsorships. When available, annual reports and sustainability reports of the Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo were reviewed.

The inclusion criteria were as follows:

1. The Coca-Cola Company or PepsiCo sponsored the organization, where sponsorship is defined by financial contribution to an organization or any of its activities.
2. The organization was domestic or, if international, doing health work in the U.S.
3. Sponsorship must have occurred in the 2011–2015 period.
4. Sponsorship by a subsidiary was acceptable.

Excluded were any health campaigns established or run by the Coca-Cola Company or PepsiCo, as by definition these organizations must receive funding from one of these two companies.

The Coca-Cola Company has published a list of most of its recipient organizations, which was analyzed for sponsorships; however, PepsiCo has not followed suit.²³

Identification of Lobbying Against Legislation

Systematic searches were performed on Google and LexisNexis for articles about lobbying done by the Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo on public health legislation. The search terms were *Coca-Cola*, *Pepsi*, or *American Beverage Association* along with *lobbying*, *legislation*, *bill*, and *soda tax*. The American Beverage Association is the main lobbying arm of the soda industry that is funded by the Coca-Cola Company, PepsiCo, and other soda companies. The terms *legislation*, *lobby*, and *bill* were chosen, rather than *law* or *statute*, in order to find laws that were actively under debate—not already passed.

The inclusion criteria were as follows:

1. Any lobbying or actions related to public health legislation from 2011 to 2015;
2. Lobbying that supported public health was included (only one such bill was found); and
3. The legislation could be federal, state, or local.

Gross annual lobbying totals were determined through the lobbying tracker at www.OpenSecrets.org. This organization analyzes millions of records to create summary data. As OpenSecrets does not state companies’ positions, outside articles were used to supplement the data.

RESULTS

In total, 95 national health organizations were found to have accepted money from the Coca-Cola Company, PepsiCo, or both (Table 1). A total of 12 organizations accepted money from both companies (13%), one accepted money from just PepsiCo (1%), and 82 accepted money from the Coca-Cola Company only (86%). Interestingly, whereas PepsiCo sponsored 14% of these health organizations, the Coca-Cola Company sponsored 99%. However, this discrepancy may be an artifact due to Coca-Cola’s recent disclosure of its sponsorships.²³

Table 1. Sponsorships of National Health Organizations by the Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo, 2011-2015

Organization	Category	Company	Source
Feeding America	Food Supply	CC, P	24,25
Food Research and Action Center (FRAC)	Food Supply	CC, P	12,26
American Cancer Society (ACS)	Foundation	CC	23
American Diabetes Association (ADA)	Foundation	CC	27,28
Children's Miracle Network	Foundation	CC, P	29
Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE USA)	Foundation	CC	30
Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation (JDRF)	Foundation	P	31-33
National Breast Cancer Foundation	Foundation	CC	23
Susan G. Komen for the Cure	Foundation	CC	23
Centers for Disease Control (CDC)	Government	CC	34
National Institutes of Health	Government	CC	23,35-38
Health and Human Services (HHS)	Government	CC	39
National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI)	Government	CC	38
National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD)	Government	CC	40
American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP)	Medicine	CC, P	23,41
American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)	Medicine	CC	23
American College of Cardiology (ACC)	Medicine	CC	42
American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM)	Medicine	CC	39,43
American Lung Association	Medicine	CC	23
American Red Cross	Medicine	CC	44
Association for Healthcare Foodservice	Medicine	CC, P	23,45
Harvard Medical School	Medicine	CC	23,46
Human Rights Campaign Foundation	Medicine	CC	23,47
Institute of Medicine	Medicine	CC	23,48
Medical University of South Carolina	Medicine	CC	23
National Association of Hispanic Nurses (NAHN)	Medicine	CC	49
National Black Nurses Association (NBNA)	Medicine	CC, P	50
National Dental Association	Medicine	CC	23
National Hispanic Medical Association (NHMA)	Medicine	CC	51
Pink Ribbon Story Foundation	Medicine	CC	23
Preventive Cardiovascular Nurses Association	Medicine	CC	52
Satcher Health Leadership Institute	Medicine	CC	23
100 Black Men of America, Inc.	Public Health	CC	23
Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (AND)	Public Health	CC, P	23,53
Active Trails (National Park Foundation)	Public Health	CC	23
AIDS Walk	Public Health	CC	23,54
America Scores	Public Health	CC, P	23,55,56
American Council on Science and Health	Public Health	CC	23
American Heart Association	Public Health	CC	23
American Society for Nutrition (ASN)	Public Health	CC, P	57
AmeriHealth Caritas	Public Health	CC	23
Arnold School of Public Health	Public Health	CC	23
Asian American Federation	Public Health	CC	23
Beth Israel/Harvard Obesity Conference	Public Health	CC	23
Black Girls RUN	Public Health	CC	23
Boys & Girls Club of America	Public Health	CC	23
Center for Food Integrity	Public Health	CC	23
Childhood Obesity and Public Health Conference	Public Health	CC	58,59
Concrete Safaris	Public Health	CC	23

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Table 1. Sponsorships of National Health Organizations by the Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo, 2011–2015 (continued)

Organization	Category	Company	Source
Congress for the New Urbanism	Public Health	CC	23
Delta Citizens Alliance	Public Health	CC	23
Education for a Better America, Inc.	Public Health	CC	23
Emory University	Public Health	CC	23
Fan4Kids	Public Health	CC	23
Food Science Policy Alliance	Public Health	CC	23
Gameday Healthy Kids Foundation	Public Health	CC	23
Girl Scouts of the USA	Public Health	CC	23
Girls Inc. Mind + Body Initiative	Public Health	CC	23
Global Summit on Physical Activity for Children	Public Health	CC	23
Good Sports	Public Health	CC	28
Habitat for Humanity	Public Health	CC	23
Health Connect South	Public Health	CC	23
Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation	Public Health	CC, P	60
Hispanic Federation	Public Health	CC	23
Hope Heart Institute	Public Health	CC	23
Hudson Institute Obesity Solutions Initiative	Public Health	CC	23
International Food Information Council	Public Health	CC	23
International Life Sciences Institute North America	Public Health	CC	23
International Positive Psychology Association	Public Health	CC	23
Marathon Kids	Public Health	CC	23
National Coalition for Women with Heart Disease	Public Health	CC	23
National Foundation for Governors' Fitness Councils	Public Health	CC	61
National Foundation on Fitness, Sports, and Nutrition	Public Health	CC	23
National Organization on Disability (NOD)	Public Health	CC	62,63
National Physical Activity Plan	Public Health	CC	23
National Recreation and Parks Association	Public Health	CC	23
National Urban League	Public Health	CC	23
National 4-H Council	Public Health	CC	23
Partnership for a Healthier America (sponsorship via Dasani/Aquafina)	Public Health	CC, P	64
Project HELP (NAACP)	Public Health	CC	65
Project Open Hand	Public Health	CC	23
Rails-to-Trails Conservancy	Public Health	CC	23
Recipe for Success Foundation	Public Health	CC	23
Rippe Lifestyle Institute	Public Health	CC	23
Save the Children	Public Health	CC, P	23,66
Society for Nutrition Educators	Public Health	CC	23
Special Olympics International	Public Health	CC	23
Street Soccer USA, Inc.	Public Health	CC	23
The Obesity Society (TOS)	Public Health	CC	23
U.S. Soccer Foundation	Public Health	CC	23
United States Tennis Association	Public Health	CC	23
University of Georgia Department of Foods and Nutrition	Public Health	CC	23
University of Washington Center for Public Health Nutrition	Public Health	CC	23
West Virginia University College of Public Health	Public Health	CC	23
YMCA	Public Health	CC	23

CC, Coca-Cola Company; NAACP, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; P, PepsiCo; YMCA, Young Men's Christian Association.

Of the 95 sponsored organizations, there were 63 public health organizations, 18 medical organizations, seven health foundations, five government organizations, and two food supply groups. The list contains two diabetes organizations, the American Diabetes Association and the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, which is surprising, given the established link between diabetes and soda consumption.^{67,68} Also worth noting are the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and the American Academy of Pediatrics, which declined to renew their contracts with the Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo in 2016.⁶⁹

Between 2011 and 2015, a total of 29 bills or proposed regulations were identified that were publicly supported or opposed by the Coca-Cola Company, PepsiCo, or these companies' lobbying arms (Table 2). Of these, 12 were soda taxes, four were Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program regulations, three were regulations on advertising, one was New York's soda portion limit, and one was a bill for cigarette-like labels on sugary drinks. In 28 of 29 cases (97%), the positions of the soda companies were antagonistic to public health. Six pieces of legislation or regulations were federal:

1. 2013 restrictions on purchase of junk food with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program;
2. 2011 national voluntary guidelines for marketing food to children;
3. a 2014 soda tax;
4. 2012 regulations on genetically modified organism labeling;
5. 2015 regulations on genetically modified organism labeling; and
6. 2014 restrictions on marketing of soda and junk food in schools.

The latter is the one case where both soda companies supported public health. Of the remaining 23 cases, nine were local, and 14 were at the state level.

The one case in which the Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo supported public health involved new limitations on marketing of sugary drinks and junk foods at schools, but other products such as Diet Coke could still be marketed. Further, the rules included exemptions for expensive changes, such as a scoreboard advertising Coca-Cola, which would have to be replaced eventually but could remain standing for an indefinite period of time.

Of all 29 bills, 12 were opposed directly by the Coca-Cola Company, eight by PepsiCo, 19 by the American Beverage Association, and six by the Grocery Manufacturers Association. As it is known that the American Beverage Association and Grocery Manufacturers

Association are funded by the Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo, it was concluded that all 29 bills were opposed by the Coca-Cola Company and 26 of 29 bills (90%) were opposed by PepsiCo.^{87,107}

Between 2011 and 2014, the Coca-Cola Company spent on average >\$6 million per year, PepsiCo spent >\$3 million per year, and the American Beverage Association spent >\$1 million per year. All three expenditures spiked in 2009, when these groups fought the 2009 federal soda tax; in that year, Coca-Cola spent \$9.4 million, PepsiCo spent \$9.5 million, and the American Beverage Association spent \$18.9 million.^{108–110}

DISCUSSION

This is the first study to systematically catalog sponsorship of national health organizations by soda companies. Because health organizations have strong voices in law-making and politics, it is important to understand the extent and nature of sponsorships by soda companies. This study found that the Coca-Cola Company sponsored 94 and PepsiCo sponsored 13 national health organizations. Although it seems the Coca-Cola Company may invest more than PepsiCo in sponsorships, this result is likely due to bias from increased availability of Coca-Cola sponsorship records. These records were released as part of the transparency initiative, which the Coca-Cola company started after it was rebuked for covertly sponsoring the Global Energy Balance Network, a group run through the University of Colorado School of Medicine that downplayed diet and highlighted exercise as the solution to obesity.^{111,112}

Previous literature suggests that sponsorships of health organizations can have a nefarious impact on public health. Studies of alcohol company sponsorship and tobacco sponsorship suggest that corporate philanthropy is a marketing tool used to silence health organizations that might otherwise lobby and support public health measures against these industries. For example, Save the Children, a group that promoted soda taxes, suddenly dropped this effort in 2010 after receiving more than \$5 million from the Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo in 2009.¹¹³ Further, the principle of reciprocity suggests that sponsored organizations may not simply become silent, but may also support initiatives of soda companies. Social psychologist Robert Cialdini¹¹⁴ explains that the human drive to reciprocate “possesses awesome strength, often producing a yes response to a request that, except for an existing feeling of indebtedness, would surely have been refused.” For example, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which accepts money from Coca-Cola to administer a large public health initiative called Project HELP, staunchly fought Mayor

Table 2. Lobbying on Soda-Related Public Health Bills, 2011–2015

Topic	Description	Lobbying group	For or against?	Position consistent with public health?	Location	Year	Reference
Ad regulations	Health warnings on ads for sugary drinks	ABA	Against	No	San Francisco, CA	2015	70
	Marketing restrictions for already implemented school food restrictions	CC, P, ABA	For	Yes ^a	U.S.	2014	71
	National voluntary guidelines for marketing food to children	CC, P	Against	No	U.S.	2011	72
SNAP regulations	Restrictions on purchase of junk food with SNAP	ABA	Against	No	TX	2013	73,74
	Restrictions on purchase of soda with SNAP in federal farm bill	CC, ABA	Against	No	U.S.	2013	75–77
	Restrictions on purchase of soda and other sugary items with SNAP	CC	Against	No	FL	2012	78,79
	Restrictions on sugary drink purchase with SNAP	ABA	Against	No	New York, NY	2011	78,80
GMO labeling	Safe and Accurate Food Labeling Act (DARK Act), which prevents state GMO labeling efforts	CC, P, ABA, GMA	For	No	U.S.	2015	81–83
	State GMO labeling law	CC	Against	No	OR	2014	84
	State GMO labeling law	CC	Against	No	NY	2014	85
	National GMO labeling law	P, GMA	Against	No	U.S.	2013	86
	State GMO labeling law	CC, P, GMA	Against	No	WA	2013	87
	State GMO labeling law	CC, P, GMA	Against	No	CA	2012	88
	State GMO labeling law	GMA	Against	No	CA	2014	89
	State GMO labeling law	GMA	Against	No	VT	2014	90
Other labeling	Cigarette-like labels on sugary drinks	ABA	Against	No	NY	2015	91,92
Soda portion limit	Portion size limit on sugary drinks	ABA	Against	No	New York, NY	2013	93
Soda taxes	State soda tax	ABA	Against	No	VT	2015	94
	National soda tax	CC, ABA	Against	No	U.S.	2014	95,96
	Local soda tax	ABA	Against	No	Berkeley, CA	2014	97
	Local soda tax	ABA	Against	No	Telluride, CO	2014	98
	Local soda tax	CC, P	Against	No	San Francisco, CA	2014	99
	State soda tax	ABA	Against	No	IL	2014	100
	State soda tax	ABA	Against	No	HI	2013	101
	Local soda tax	ABA	Against	No	Richmond, CA	2012	102

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Table 2. Lobbying on Soda-Related Public Health Bills, 2011–2015 (continued)

Topic	Description	Lobbying group	For or against?	Position consistent with public health?	Location	Year	Reference
	Local soda tax	ABA	Against	No	El Monte, CA	2012	¹⁰³
	State soda tax	CC, P, ABA	Against	No	RI	2012	¹⁰⁴
	State soda tax	ABA	Against	No	PA	2011	^{12,105}
	Local soda tax	ABA	Against	No	Chicago, IL	2015	¹⁰⁶

^aThis bill is rather weak in effect, and it contains exceptions that could delay changes for years. ABA, American Beverage Association; CC, Coca-Cola Company; GMA, Grocery Manufacturers Association; GMO, genetically modified organism; P, PepsiCo; SNAP, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Bloomberg’s proposed soda portion size limit in New York City.¹¹⁵ Likewise, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics issued a statement declining to support the ban, saying that education about sound nutrition should be re-emphasized.¹³ Also, a recent *New York Times* investigative report revealed that Coca-Cola played a leading role in shaping the communications of the Global Energy Balance Network, as mentioned.^{111,116} These communications, in turn, may shape the way Americans think about food and exercise.

Over the past 5 years, 28 of 29 public health bills lobbied by the Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo were opposed, not supported, by these companies. Further, the only bill they supported has exceptions and loopholes. It is possible that the Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo predicted these measures would be established soon and decided to ally with them to appear beneficent. Regardless of this instance, the opposition by the Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo of 28 of 29 bills demonstrates their primary interest of improving profit at the expense of public health.

The Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo together sponsor, at minimum, 95 health organizations, each with a national impact. These soda companies use relationships with health organizations to develop positive associations for their brand, which is important for their bottom line. Soda companies also can neutralize potential legislative opposition by invoking reciprocity and financial dependence on the part of national health organizations. Rather than supporting public health, organizations may become unwitting partners that contribute to corporate marketing strategy. Indeed, sponsorship is considered as a marketing tool by both the Federal Trade Commission and soda companies themselves.^{16,117} Former PepsiCo marketing officer Shiv Singh admitted that the Pepsi Refresh Project was funded not with “corporate philanthropy dollars,” but with “brand marketing dollars, because we believed fundamentally and still do that, you know, by doing good in a way that’s aligned with our Pepsi brand values, you know, we can help the bottom line.”¹⁶ It is probable that corporate philanthropy is increasing consumption of soda throughout the country.

This study recommends ideally that health organizations reject sponsorship offers from soda companies and find alternative sources of funding. Organizations that accept money generate a conflict of interest, which introduces a subconscious bias in favor of the donor company. Lessons can be learned from the history of tobacco companies, which have long given money to sympathetic organizations that deal with domestic abuse, hunger, and minority advancement.¹⁸ Now, most organizations refuse tobacco money. Perhaps soda companies should be treated similarly. Leading the way in this effort

are the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Family Physicians, and the American College of Cardiology, all of which did not renew new contracts with Coca-Cola at the end of 2015.⁶⁹ Other organizations should consider following this lead and that of the University of Colorado School of Medicine, which returned a \$1 million sponsorship in 2015.¹¹⁸ In addition, it would be useful to conduct research on sponsorship at the local and state levels to develop a complete picture of soda company sponsorship.

Limitations

This study elucidates the sponsorship of national health organizations, but it is certainly an underestimate of current sponsorship. Because the Coca-Cola Company is disclosing its sponsorships, the main limitation is that this study may have missed some of PepsiCo's, especially because this company is known for making its sponsorship data extremely difficult to track.¹¹⁹ This study also did not include other soda companies, which engage in similar philanthropic marketing. Finally, this study has catalogued only national organizations here, whereas most sponsored organizations are citywide or statewide. Therefore, this study underestimates the problem.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has found extensive sponsorship of national health organizations by soda companies. Such sponsorships are likely to serve marketing functions, such as to dampen health groups' support of legislation that would reduce soda consumption and improve soda companies' public image. It is recommended that organizations find alternative sources of revenue in order to stop indirectly and inadvertently increasing soda consumption and causing substantial harm to Americans.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

A previous version of this article, available online ahead of print October 10, 2016, noted that a May 2013 article published on the Coca-Cola corporate website suggests the American Medical Association (AMA) received sponsorship funding from the Coca-Cola Company for the Exercise is Medicine initiative, a program that the AMA jointly launched with the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) in November 2007. This information was incorrect. The AMA cut ties with the Exercise is Medicine initiative in December 2008. This was done after ACSM informed AMA of its intent to accept funding from Coca-Cola as a corporate supporter of the initiative. The AMA's withdrawal from the initiative predates the 2013 Coca-Cola article, as well as the timeline criteria of the study (2011–2015). Therefore, we should not have reported any funding of the

American Medical Association by the Coca-Cola Company during the study period. We apologize to the American Medical Association for this mistake.

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DGA conducted the searches, organized and analyzed the data, and wrote the manuscript. MBS advised the research, analyzed the data, and helped write the manuscript.

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