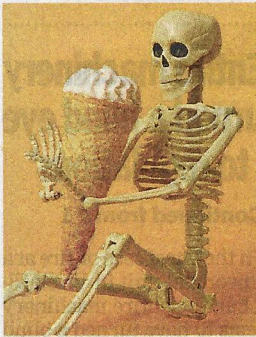


Sugar & Vice

*Better food labelling will be a better deterrent.
Public health trumps industry interests*

Historically, food industry bats for unhealthy status-quoism. Like, the 1960s US effort to boost cavity prevention didn't choose the obvious guidance – eat less sugar. Instead, industry interests managed to push alternatives such as, fight dental plaque. Today, in India, the NIN-ICMR recommendation to set thresholds for sugar in packaged food and beverages, is being called 'impractical' by company executives. The appropriate adjective is 'imperative'.

Bitter formula | It felt bitter to be told that Nestle does not add sugar to the infant milk it sells in Europe, but does so in India. Giant food & beverage MNCs do have different quality standards for different countries. But what is no less bitter is that the 2011 Dietary Guidelines for India actually advised feeding infants one teaspoon of sugar per 120-180 ml milk feed, 6-8 times a day. This year's update of the guidelines was most needed. It responds to a science that can no longer be silenced, which has countries from east to west beginning to treat sugar as on the same level of a health threat as tobacco.



Rough drink | Setting threshold limits for sugar is a very important first step towards easing Indians' very sour addiction to it. This has to be followed by the much harder work of educating the public about new labelling, and monitoring it for accuracy. The recent GOI advisory against the use of the 'health drink' label for some popular brands, is also important in this

context. A better-educated consumer will read the labelling for nutrient details, instead of being swayed by 'health' claims. A better monitoring regime will investigate the veracity of such claims 24x7.

Junk mithai | But what about your neighbourhood mithai shop? Maybe there is more than one. Eitherways, the sugar bombs here are free to explode as they will. No label or threshold inhibits them. Clearly, a lot of the dangerous food habits that are perceived as traditional also need changing. Schools have to play a key role in this transformation. Starting off with good food habits is much easier than fixing bad ones.