

Sugar, Sweet Suicide – Part II

by Gary Null, PhD

Studies on Sugar's Detrimental Effects

If you need more convincing that sugar is bad for you in so many ways, take a look at these studies provided by Nancy Appleton, PhD:⁷⁸

Addiction

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Acta Ophthalmologica Scandinavica, March 2002 (vol. 48. P.125)

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Sugar and Slavery

"It was hot for February. The sun was beating down on the sidewalk in front of See's candy store where I was about to pick up a pound of assorted truffles as a Valentine's Day treat for my wife and kids. My mouth was already watering in anticipation of the Mom's Apple Pie truffle I was planning to throw in as a little present to myself. Out on the sidewalk, just to the right of the store entrance, a threesome of smiling young people stood by the door, holding cameras and a big basket full of little paper hearts. As I approached, one of them said, 'Happy Valentine's Day,' and handed me a piece of paper. Assuming they were employees of See's, I accepted the paper, expecting it to be a discount coupon or perhaps a list of Valentine's Day specials.

"Instead it turned out to be a protest flyer, emblazoned with the headline, 'See's Candies: Slavery and Exploitation Break Our Hearts!' Under that were the words, 'We want Fair Trade, not child slavery and poverty wages!' There was a photo of three emaciated boys sitting beside a pile of cocoa pods, staring blankly at their hands. Happy Valentine's Day indeed."⁷⁹ So begins David Templeton's article, "Are American candy companies sweetening the profits with child slavery?"

Within America, slavery and child labor may be a thing of the past, but this is not true throughout the world where most of the workforce is compelled to work for little or no pay. Desperately poor families in impoverished nations will sell their children into a life of drudgery in exchange for what amounts to only a few dollars. Templeton continues, "The flyer announced that 43% of the world's cocoa comes from plantations on the Ivory Coast, a part of the planet where child slavery is very much in practice. In response to massive national poverty caused in part by the bottoming out of

cocoa prices, parents there are taking cash in exchange for sending their children to work the plantations. In other cocoa-producing regions, those workers actually paid to harvest the cocoa earn such low wages their families 'are on the brink of debt and starvation,' according to the flyer. Workers who try to escape are severely beaten, as are any who fall under the weight of the cocoa bags they're forced to carry."⁸⁰

While many are sold into forced labor, others are tricked into it. In his article, "Slavery: worldwide evil: From India to Indiana, more people are enslaved today than ever before," Dr. Charles Jacobs writes: "Next time you add sugar to your coffee, think of Andre Prevot. A Haitian, Prevot met a man who promised him a good job nearby in the Dominican Republic.... 'He took me across the border and sold me to the Dominican soldiers for \$8,' explains Prevot. Once in their custody, he suffered the fate of thousands of his countrymen who are forced against their will to cut cane for six or seven months - from December to June - for little or no money...."⁸¹

Refusal to work is not an option. Any objection or escape attempt is met with a beating or worse. In an article printed in the *New Internationalist*, "Slavery on sugar plantations is a thing of the past. Or is it?" Peter Cox writes, "We suffered all kinds of punishment," one witness told the Brazilian Justice Ministry. "We were hit with rifle butts, kicked and punched. I tried to escape; so did my uncle. He was shot and killed by farm gunslingsers."⁸² "Life for these people is worse now than it was under slavery," says Wilson Furtado of the agriculture federation in Bahia state, Brazil. "Then the owners had some capital tied up in their slaves so it cost them if one died, but now they lose nothing."⁸³

In the Dominican Republic, life for sugar slaves, like Prevot, can only be described as despicable. From sun up to sundown, captives are made to toil in the brutal sun where they must endure sharp cuts to their skin from knife-like cane leaves. At the end of a grueling day, workers retire to small, dark, filthy, crowded rooms where they may sleep on a concrete floor or a cardboard box. The lucky ones have electricity, running water, and thin foam mattresses. Their shantytown lodgings, called bateys, lack running water and cooking facilities, and there are few latrines.

Although the Haitians are paid for their work - theoretically, the most skilled laborers earn between \$60 to \$70 a month - this sum melts away in a system designed to steal from the least

powerful. First, workers must tip someone to weigh the cane leaves soon after they are cut; otherwise, their weight will shrink. Furthermore, the men are paid in coupons called vales, which the local store discounts at 20 percent. The best workers might be left with \$15 a month, barely enough to survive on their own.⁸⁴

Around the globe, such unfortunate souls are forced to supply intensive, profitable labor for just about every industry imaginable. The shoes and shirts you wear might be assembled by children chained to sewing machines in India and the soccer balls that mean fun for you and your family may have been sewn together by calloused little fingers in Pakistan. The same is true of everything from jewelry to steel, tobacco, sugar and cocoa products. "The list goes on and on," says Kevin Bales in his book, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* (University of California Press, 2001), "Thanks to the global economy, these slave-produced products move smoothly around the globe."

While we think of globalization as a relatively new phenomenon, slavery was one of the first global industries, providing an economic tie between Africa,

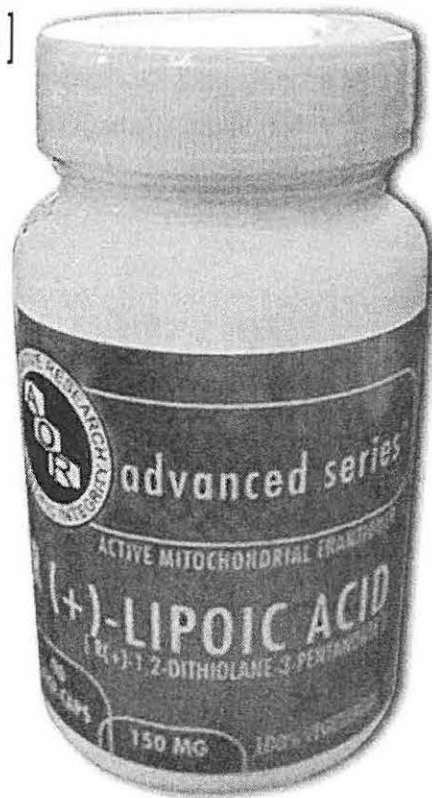
Europe, and the Americas centuries ago. For the most part, the slave trade was propelled by the needs of the sugar industry. When the Dutch expanded sugar production in the 1600's, they needed cheap labor to increase productivity, and massive numbers of slaves were considered necessary for this to happen. Because they were physically strong and easily controlled, Africans were taken to the Caribbean islands en masse. Sugar, even more than tobacco or cotton, became the foundation for European imperialism. In the 1800's, after the soil used to grow sugar showed a decline in productivity, the need for slave labor decreased. This reason, along with sentiments against slavery in England, led to the emancipation of slaves in 1834.⁸⁵

Notes Norman Kretchmer and Claire B. Hollenbeck in their book, *Sugars and Sweeteners* (1991), "It is estimated that by the time slavery was abolished, the transport of slaves involved 22 million people, 12 million of whom were utilized in the Americas. The remainder died on

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Sugar

board ship or shortly after arrival. A number of historians state that sugar was responsible for 70% of the traffic of slavery.⁸⁶ According to Deerr in *The History of Sugar, Volumes One and Two* (1949-50), "I had not at first planned to do more than touch on the margins of slavery. As material accumulated, it became evident that to write a history of sugar without at the same time treating slavery, was like trying to produce Hamlet with the part of Laertes omitted."⁸⁷

As our earlier example of Haitian forced labor in the Dominican Republic reveals, the sugar industry continues to exploit laborers in the same unethical manner today. There is even a word for it – *peonage* – a vicious system of forced labor, common in many parts of Latin America, Asia, and even in the southern US. A recruiter entices the poor and the homeless with promises of employment, good wages, food, and shelter. Then they are trucked long distances to toil on remote plantations where they are held

prisoner and compelled to work at gunpoint.

The harm of sugar cultivation extends beyond exploited workers to the nations that grow it. In recent decades, falling commodity prices contributed to the collapse of the sugar industry on Negros island where 60% of the Philippines sugar is produced. A survey conducted by the National Secretariat of Social Action showed the result to be widespread poverty and malnutrition to the island's inhabitants. In 1985, 40% of children under the age of 14 were malnourished. One year later, that number rose to 73% of children.

Says Cox, "How could one of the richest islands of the Philippines become the setting for another Ethiopia, where an estimated 85,000 children under six were suffering from moderate or severe malnutrition? Well, partly because the corrupt Marcos regime mismanaged the industry. Also, the US market for Philippine sugar disappeared (being replaced by corn syrup), throwing a quarter of a million sugar workers out of their jobs. And the land – rich and fertile – was exclusively used for sugar cane, which prevented self-sufficiency in food

production. A disaster was waiting to happen."⁸⁸

As landless cane workers migrate to the upland sites and begin to cultivate new areas, they create grave problems for the ecology as this 1997 American University in Washington DC study of the Philippine sugar industry demonstrates. "The relationship between sugar production and environmental damage is found in deforestation, soil erosion, and consequent bio-diversity loss caused by forest conversion to sugar cane field. Forest clearing caused widespread soil erosion and had a devastating effect on the ecology, wiping out a third to a half of the known species of snail and birds in the Philippines.

"An example of the Ormoc deluge which caused over 5,000 people to die in November 1992 illustrated the seriousness of deforestation. Since the 1950's, the watershed area around Ormoc had been planted with sugar, which does not absorb flood waters. Only 10% of the mountain range was still forested. Also, floods at Nueve Ecija in a northern province of the Philippines in July 1992 were caused by massive deforestation. Only 11.7% of the 14,000 hectare in the

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area remains covered with forest; much of the watershed has been converted into sugar plantations.

"The deforestation rate of the Philippines is now pegged at 25 hectares an hour or 219,000 hectares a year. Experts say the country can expect its forests to be gone in less than 40 years."⁸⁹

In case you think this is someone else's problem, consider the involvement of one of America's largest corporations, Gulf & Western (the owner of Paramount Pictures). In their book, *The Democratic Facade* (Cole Publishing Company, 1991), Daniel Hellinger and Dennis Brooks explain: "Gulf & Western came to the Dominican Republic in 1966, two years after an invasion by US Marines. Aided by major tax concessions granted by President Balaguer to foreign investors, economic penetration of the country quickly followed US military and political intervention. With loans from Chase Manhattan Bank, Gulf & Western gained a foothold in the island's economy with its purchase of the South Puerto Rico Sugar Company. By 1976, its investment had grown to \$300 million in sugar, meat, citrus, tourism, and tobacco. Other transnational corporations also operated in the Dominican Republic, but Gulf & Western dominated the economy as the country's largest landowner, employer, and exporter. Because the yearly revenues of Gulf & Western were greater than the Dominican Republic's Gross National Product, it could accurately be called 'a state within a state.'

"Immediately on entering the country, Gulf & Western broke the sugarcane workers' union Sindicato Unido. Denouncing the union as communist controlled, the corporation fired the entire union leadership, annulled its contracts, and sent in police to occupy the plant while the American Institute for Free Labor Development (an agency financed in part by the CIA) formed a new union that obtained immediate acceptance from the Dominican president. The possibility of free unions on Gulf's sugar plantations disappeared (along with dozens of labor leaders), with the result that of the country's 20,000 cane cutters, only one out of ten is Dominican. Most of the cane workers are Haitian immigrants paid \$1.50 to \$3.00 a day to do what Dominicans call 'slave work.'

"Gulf & Western set up the first of the industrial free zones that thrive in the Dominican Republic. Often called 'runaway shops' (because businesses relocate there from US communities) or 'export platforms,' such zones offer a low-wage labor force, government subsidies,

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and freedom from taxes and environmental regulations. Unions are not permitted in these zones, and thus in the mid-1980's, 22,000 workers earned an average of 65 cents per hour working in factories surrounded by barbed wire and security guards. Dominican Law 299 grants corporations a 100% exemption from Dominican taxes and also provides them a 70% government subsidy of plant construction costs to set up business in the zones. Bestform, Esmark, Milton Bradley, Ideal Toys, Fisher Price, and North American Phillips are among the US corporations that take advantage of the free zones to assemble and manufacture their products for export back to the US."⁹⁰

Gulf & Western has since sold its 240,000 acres of plantations to the politically powerful Fanjul family in Palm Beach. Unfortunately, its new owners continue to perpetuate the abuse rather than improve conditions for its workers.⁹¹

As you can see, the common assumption that slavery has been abolished must be reassessed as we honestly assess the disservices of globalization. One thing we know for certain; the sugar industry has always been in the forefront of this disgraceful practice.

Conclusion

Think of the vast harm we are doing to ourselves and our world by indulging in 162 pounds of sugar per person each year. As you have seen, our addiction to sweets not only robs us of our priceless health, but also is the cause of untold suffering and ecological destruction.

While sugar lobbyists promote lies about sugar's safety and healthy benefits, many lives are being destroyed. Industrial nations suffer from diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer, depression, and obesity. Indeed, diabetics are even being told that it is safe for them to enjoy sugar, the cause of their illness, as long as they watch their blood sugar levels! Multinational companies grow richer through exploitation, then leave. It's just 'good business' to them. Meanwhile, poor countries grow poorer and are left with an impoverished, malnourished populace, and a loss of forests, precious resources that once lost can never be fully recovered.

For the sake of a better life and a better world, it is imperative that we choose to eat differently. This means we must retrain our taste buds to once again

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► appreciate whole foods. As cravings for refined carbohydrates diminish – and they will – aches and pains will diminish, we will feel and look better, and our change in diet and lifestyle will become easier still. There is no magic bullet to take our suffering away if we refuse to change our lifestyle.

While making better choices for ourselves can be an isolating experience in this sugar-saturated world, some people are attempting to create a more supportive atmosphere. In a 2001 *Washington Post* article, Sally Squires writes about Surgeon General David Satcher's proposed plan of action to combat overweight and obesity on a national level. His recommendations require some major changes for schools, restaurants, workplaces, and communities and include the following:

- Less fattening school lunches
- Less student access to vending machines
- Daily physical exercise classes for all children and adolescents
- Information on nutrition to customers at restaurants and fast food establishments
- Weight management and physical activity counseling as part of employee health insurance coverage
- Allowing employees time to exercise
- Obesity classified as a disease to encourage insurance companies to reimburse weight-control expense.

"This is not about aesthetics and it's not about appearances," says Satcher. "We're talking about health.... An estimated 1,200 people die daily from weight-related illnesses. That adds up to 300,000 deaths a year, more than the number killed annually by pneumonia, motor vehicle accidents, and airline crashes combined – and nearly as many as the 430,000 who die yearly from tobacco-related conditions. Health care costs for overweight and obesity total an estimated \$117 billion annually..."⁹² Ms. Squires adds that trimming just 15 pounds could cut the risk of diabetes by 58% in those one step from developing the disease. That, in turn, could cut treatment costs by about \$58 million annually and pay for a lot of health insurance. When you think about it, it makes a lot of sense from both the standpoint of health and the health care business.

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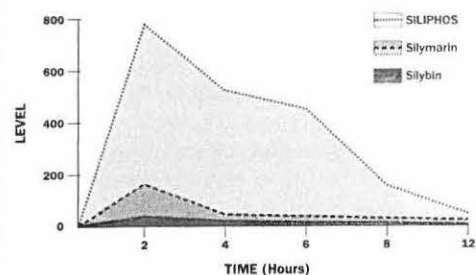
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