

## **Interview of Bernard Lown, M.D.**

**Professor Emeritus at the Harvard School of Public Health, senior physician (retired) at the Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, founder of the Lown Cardiovascular Group and the Chairman Emeritus of the Lown Institute.**

Interview conducted and recorded December 12, 2016, in Chestnut Hill, MA, by David Merritt Johns, Center for the History & Ethics of Public Health, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. Topics included the history of Harvard's Department of Nutrition, the possible influence of the sugar industry on nutrition scientists in the department, and Lown's own experiences with journals and funders.

A lightly edited partial transcript of the interview covering the above topic areas was reviewed and corrected by Dr. Lown in January 2018. The following excerpts are posted publicly with the Dr. Lown's permission.

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### *On Fred Stare and launching a new Department of Nutrition*

When Fred Stare started the Department of Nutrition, he had very little space. We were working in an old, crowded building. So in order to have enough money to fulfill his dreams about nutrition playing a role in medicine, whom did he have to turn to? The food industry. It was logical, and it's going on all the time now and we don't get excited about it. It was proper.

### *Diet-heart research and the role of the sugar industry*

They [Stare and Hegsted] were influenced I believe by Ancel Keys, because he was a charismatic figure who traveled all over the world setting up studies. They were confirmed in their belief that lipids played a key role in the diet. And so their involvement with the sugar business was something that was sort of natural in that as nutrition researchers they might be involved with *any* food industry, but without a sense of obeisance, and without the industry being in control. There was no, "We'll get money from them and make the results come out this way." This was not reality. This was an invention after the fact about what happened. It didn't happen that way. And I'm a neutral witness. I have no stake one way or the other.

### *On sponsored research, financial disclosure, and personalities in the department*

It was a great department to be in. There was no competitiveness. Stare was busy raising money for the research of all of the others in this large department. And the quality of the research was acknowledged by the fact of its publication in first-class journals. There was no sense of "being bought." There was no demand from journals to acknowledge that you had received funds from industry or any other entity at the time. This didn't come along until the 1970s, or later. I don't remember acknowledging anything until the late '80s. It

wasn't required. It never entered my mind! And I'm sure the same thing applied to Stare and Hegsted. Hegsted was of unimpeachable integrity. He was interested in nutritional policy. He was interested in diet and health. He was a very straightforward, scientific, where-is-the-data type of person.

*On claims that Hegsted was influenced by the sugar industry*

It's all wrong thinking. It's un-historical, and therefore unreal, and therefore untrue. It's true that the tobacco industry did terrible things. History has its demons, but the demons are not the people or scientists who are living in the culture of the day, and function according to the norms and conceptual guidelines of the period. You cannot judge accurately with your own standards of today what went on 20 or 50 years ago. To my mind – and I'm not a historian – but it makes no sense.