

# GRENOBLE ECOLE DE MANAGEMENT

## CONCOURS HEC SESSION 2017

### EPREUVE ORALE D'ANGLAIS

#### Script n°04

#### Sweet Death

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Sugar. It is so nice, isn't it? No wonder it is a pet name for our most-loved companion – our “sweetheart”. Sugar is a positive, a life enhancer. Not something that could be associated with blindness, kidney failure, heart attacks, stroke and lower limb amputation, surely?

The World Health Organisation really knows how to ruin the mood. That said, the mood needs ruining. Problems with blood sugar kill nearly four million people a year. According to Gary Taubes's polemic, a fierce work<sup>1</sup> that he explicitly describes as “the case for the prosecution”, we need to wage war on the sweet stuff. As he concedes, however, we have very few weapons in our armoury, and sugar may already have won.

This victory is manifest in the epidemic of diabetes sweeping the planet. The number of people with the condition has nearly doubled since 1980: it is now heading towards 450 million globally. Roughly, 18 million people in the UK are “pre-diabetic”, with elevated blood glucose and a similarly elevated chance of developing type 2 diabetes. You could be among them. Sugar's killer strategy is that it is always someone else's problem – until it is too late.

The US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention predicts that one in three Americans will have diabetes by 2030. The rest of us won't fare much better: the International Diabetes Federation forecasts that, across the world, one adult in ten will have diabetes by 2030.

Yet it is unlikely that governments will act. They are paralysed by the economic dominance of what British colonialists called “white gold”. The sugar industry, like financial services, is too big to fail.

It might be difficult to understand how, in a scientific age, this has been allowed to happen. The simple answer is that the science can never be conclusive enough. Those who do not want to believe it, for ideological or economic reasons, can excuse themselves. We have seen this happen in the case of pesticides that wiped out species, with the chemicals that destroyed the ozone layer, with the deadly effects of tobacco and with global warming. Science can be

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Taubes, *The Case Against Sugar* (Published by Portobello Books, 2017).

twisted, co-opted or ignored by those who hold the reins of power. And those who rely on financial support from those in power will acquiesce and toe the line of doubt.

So, what should we do? It is not easy to cut our intake. “Any discussion of how little sugar is too much also has to account for the possibility that sugar is a drug and perhaps addictive,” Taubes notes. “Substantial sugar consumption is the norm and virtually unavoidable and everyone does it. Trying to consume sugar in moderation, however it’s defined, in such a world is likely to be no more successful for some of us than trying to smoke cigarettes in moderation.”

Arguably, the sugar business has been even more successful than the tobacco industry. As Taubes points out, sugar has “assimilated itself into all aspects of our eating experience”. It is impossible to single out one area – soft drinks, or ready-meals, or confectionery – as the principal problem. It is in everything. Bread, ice creams, canned foods, fruit juice, energy drinks and pretzels are all pumped with the stuff, as are low-fat foods that were meant to save us from obesity.

That said, he clearly thinks a special place in hell should be reserved for breakfast cereal manufacturers. Sweetened cereals, some of which derive one-third or more of their calories from sugar, are marketed directly at children using animated characters in what is surely one of the most cynical industries on Earth. Sugar is to children what alcohol is to adults. And if you can get them hooked before they’re out of nappies, you’ve got a customer for life.

This is a book to make you put your head in your hands and wonder how humanity has endured so long. We see ourselves as the pinnacle of evolution, and yet we seem to be the dumbest, most self-destructive species on the planet. The sugar industry is certainly far cleverer than we are. Can Taubes’s expertly written and disturbing book change that culture?