

Cogent arguments have been made for setting aside real, apparent and potential conflicts of interest when determining a manuscript's worthiness for publication, mainly in relation to tobacco industry-funded research in the late 1990s, e.g. [14]. Almost a decade on, however, evidence for the duplicitous intentions and strategies of dangerous consumption industries (SAPROs in particular) which engage scientists in research activities has come to light more clearly. There is convincing evidence for the negative impact of those strategies on the integrity of shared scientific knowledge, and for this the scientific community will not escape being held responsible by the public. As the timely warning goes out to scientists, universities and governments about the perils of engaging in funding relationships with the alcohol industry, it seems a natural extension for addiction journals to lead an evidence-based re-appraisal of the merits of publishing the products of such relationships.

Declaration of interest

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Keywords Alcohol, alcohol beverage industry, alcohol research, conflict of interest, ethics, social aspects/publicrelations organizations.

TANYA CHIKRITZHS

National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University of Technology, Perth, Western Australia, WA 6845, Australia.

E-mail: t.n.chikritzhs@curtin.edu.au

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RESEARCH FUNDING—A COMPLEX BUSINESS

Having served as a scientist in the Finnish Alcohol Monopoly for 15 years, after receiving individual tax-free grants from the same source for several years, I feel perplexed to read the recommendation that '...it should be recognized from the information reviewed in this paper that under most circumstances collaboration [of researchers] with the alcoholic beverage industry is neither warranted nor advisable'. The Finnish monopoly, which capped not only retail but also wholesale, importation and production (of a wide range of goods) in its orb, had other constraints besides grinding money to the state; but it, too, had interests, not least of them getting rid of us. For the businessmen we were simply useless. Our research rarely troubled them enough to incite any attempts to interfere, even when we proposed and in fact convinced the alcohol policy circle for a short while that limiting the growth of the overall consumption, i.e. the business of our funding source, is a good idea [1].

Stenius & Babor have provided an important service to the research community by mapping out systematically the risks and hazards involved in receiving funding from private sources and in listing altogether 24 recommenda-

tions to all participants as how to avoid them [2]. Nevertheless, their perspective is very Nordic. If the alcohol industries were not to fund any research there would be practically none in France, Italy and probably many other countries. The original source of international alcohol consumption statistics was the Dutch distilling industry. Even in countries where alcohol research is funded formally from governments, the money is often raised from the drinks business. Their advice would stop most of the gambling research in the whole world. Applied to research on dangerous consumption or otherwise controversial social issues, the conclusion becomes even more confusing: think of the Volkswagen foundation, the Wellcome Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation and thousands of other sources that fund research not only on alcohol and drug policy relevant topics, but also on other issues that involve conflicting interests. If anyone who makes money on a product would not be allowed to use it for research [3], the profits might be smaller but also many people would be less well and die earlier.

The tone of alarm that I read from this paper is most relevant concerning relatively small pockets and streams of money from particular companies or lobby groups to particular researchers or teams. This is a very small part of the whole. Research funding is an extremely complex system of dependencies and interests, and the biggest issue is not what individual researchers—or even industry representatives themselves—write in their reports, but societal and ethical consequences of science and technology policy as a whole. I see more problems involved in the money that flows from governments to industries than from industries to researchers.

However, let us stick to the narrow problem and interpret that ‘collaboration with the alcoholic beverage industries’ refers only to particular private companies or their lobbying organizations. Here is the second bias of the approach. Stenius & Babor assume without further ado that ‘Governments have a responsibility to protect the health and welfare of the population . . . this responsibility makes the state distinct from other stakeholders, such as the alcohol industry or nongovernmental organizations that represent specific interests that may conflict with public health and welfare’. Who is the government and what is the public good it represents? The Finnish government decided to lower alcohol taxes substantially in 2004. About 2000 people died; alcohol consumption and problems increased permanently. This decision was backed by research, estimates of consequences were made and in fact they were quite accurate; the fiscal and economic targets were explicit, and even public health arguments were used occasionally to justify the measure. Many researchers protested in public, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health disagreed, but the Ministry of

Finance held its way. This was public policy exercised by the government, but this alone hardly justifies it. Policy has to be judged by its objectives and consequences, not on the basis of who provides the research evidence for it.

The world is full of examples where the public health industries themselves are the principal stakeholders. Health and welfare ministries set up programmes, establish funds and contract projects to implement impossible ‘prevention policies’ and have them evaluated by researchers [4]. Like research for the industry, these operations often serve no other purpose than to ‘derive a public relations benefit’ from them, and to keep the public health industry going. This is a dependency trap for researchers as dangerous as any.

It is the duty of scientists to take the role of policy advocates when their results and expertise warrant it; but I find it problematic to turn policy advocacy into an issue of research ethics and would defend my case on matter-of-fact rather than ethical arguments. To do this, I would exercise the precautions recommended by the authors to all dependencies from funding, including public sources.

Declarations of interest

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Keywords Alcohol, conflict of interest, funding, government, industry, policy, research, science policy.

PEKKA SULKUNEN

*Department of Sociology, PO Box 18, 0014
University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland.
E-mail: pekka.sulkunen@helsinki.fi*

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WANTED: A BROADER VIEW OF ALCOHOL STUDIES

Rather than address in detail the specific findings and recommendations of this paper, I would like to voice my reservations about a simple premise upon which it is based.