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Re: Is the obesity epidemic exaggerated? Yes

By David Miller and Steven Harkins

British Medical Journal, 16 April 2015

Patrick Basham and John Luik have written in the BMJ on obesity,[1] and Basham has separately written on tobacco issues.[2 3] We write to provide information on the credentials and credibility of Basham and Luik, and to raise questions about the accuracy and completeness of their BMJ conflict of interest statements.

In two BMJ blog postings Basham was referred to as 'Dr. Basham'. [2,3] Basham has claimed on a number of occasions to have a doctorate. For example in 2008: 'Mr Basham earned his BA, MA, and PhD. degrees in political science from Carleton University, the University of Houston, and Cambridge University, respectively'.[4] Today his LinkedIn page lists a 'PhD in Political Economy from Cambridge University' under qualifications.[5] We have found no published source claiming Basham has a PhD from any other university.

Basham registered for a PhD at the University of Cambridge in 1995.[6] Despite a claim that Basham had completed his doctoral dissertation by 2001,[7] the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences at Cambridge reports that the thesis, was only 'submitted to the Degree Committee' some three years later on 6 April 2004.[8] It was examined later in 2004 by Jennifer Lees Marshment, then at the University of Keele.[9] It appears the thesis was returned to Basham for revision with a view to a further Viva.. Cambridge confirms that Basham was 'withdrawn on 8 July 2009 without qualification'. In other words, Patrick Basham does not have a PhD from Cambridge University.

It can also be noted that Basham's co author John Luik, has reportedly been dismissed from two academic posts over irregularities in his CV. He reportedly claimed, while at the Nazarene College in Winnipeg from 1977 to 1985 'to have a doctorate from Oxford University'. He eventually received his doctorate but 'not until 1986'.[10] Luik went on to work at Brock University in 1986, until an official investigation reported, (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-BRwhWW8pY>), that he had cited 'visiting professorships that didn't exist, books and articles that simply didn't exist' in his CV.[10] In the Basham and Luik article on obesity and in one of Basham's blog posts on tobacco, no competing interests were declared.[1 2] In another blog post on 'snus' tobacco, Basham stated that he had 'no competing interests with any of the snus manufacturers.' [3] It is difficult to evaluate these claims since the Democracy Institute, the think tank to which Basham and Luik are affiliated, is not transparent about its sources of funding.

The Democracy Institute, operating since 2006, describes itself as a 'politically independent' think tank based in 'London and Washington'. It argues against government regulation on issues including tobacco, alcohol, food and gambling, amongst others. [11-13] It has disclosed tobacco industry funding on one report, [14] but otherwise does not declare funding sources.[15] It often declares it has not received funding from a particular industry on its publications. In one example, it stated it had received no funding 'from the food, gambling, tobacco, alcohol, or indoor tanning industries' to 'publish... research and write this paper', nor had the contents 'been shared with or reviewed by any individual or organisation affiliated with' those industries.[16]

There are several issues with these various declarations.

First, there is the issue of the negative form of these declarations. Particular industries are said not to have funded their work, but, with the single exception noted above, nothing about who has funded the work is given. Furthermore, the BMJ's policy on conflict of interest, requires that both 'personal' and 'organisational' funding sources, not just industry funding, be disclosed.

In the case of the article on 'snus', the meaning of the phrase 'any of the snus manufacturers' is potentially unclear. Given that all the major tobacco companies (including Japan Tobacco International, Imperial, BAT and Philip Morris) are involved in the snus market, the statement by definition must be a claim of no tobacco industry funding.[17] But this is not made explicit. BMJ readers deserve to have specific clarity on this.

In the case of the other BMJ article on tobacco, Basham arguably ought to have declared that he or the Democracy Institute were in receipt of funding from Imperial Tobacco, (mentioned above) as well as any other funding from the tobacco industry.

In the case of the BMJ article on obesity, if Basham and Luik or the Democracy Institute were in receipt of funding that has allowed them to work on food and obesity, from the food and/or tobacco or indeed any other industry or interest, it should have been disclosed. It is well known that the tobacco industry attempts to influence how risk is dealt with by policy makers[18] and to fund work on this.[19] In addition as in the case of climate change, corporate interests may try to disguise the funds they send to think tanks.[20]

An additional difficulty is that, though the Democracy Institute states that it is based in London and Washington DC, it is not registered as a company or a charity in the UK. In the US it is not registered as a 501(c) organization with the Internal Revenue Service, nor as a company in Washington DC (or either of the surrounding states – Maryland and Virginia).

Both authors have also had a history of close involvement with the tobacco industry. For example:

- John Luik edited a book criticising plain packaging, receiving £155,000 in total from several tobacco firms. [21-23]
- Patrick Basham was the founding director of the Social Affairs Centre of the Fraser Institute – which received funding from Rothmans International and Philip Morris. [24-25]

It is well known that the tobacco industry has attempted, to some extent successfully, to cast doubt on the health effects of tobacco for over thirty years.[26-27] Tobacco tactics have been emulated by the food and alcohol industries.[28]

The BMJ announced last year that it would no longer publish research funded by the tobacco industry.[29] Apparent irregularities in BMJ conflict of interest declarations made by Christopher Snowden of the Institute of Economic Affairs, itself a multi-year recipient of tobacco industry funding, have recently been pointed out.[30] Snowden is also described as an 'Adjunct Fellow' at the Democracy Institute.[31]

Both cases suggest that medical journals may need to be more vigilant about conflicts of interest declarations. It may be advisable to insist on explicit statements specifically requiring authors to disclose the identity and amounts of funding from corporate and other sources, including charities and foundations..

We understand that the BMJ has written to Patrick Basham on a number of occasions inviting him to clarify his claim to have a PhD, so far without response. It appears that it may also need to write to both Basham and Luik to clarify this matter and their conflicting interests statements. If no response is forthcoming, it may be necessary to draw attention to this by printing a correction and to think whether any other measures can be taken against those that appear to subvert the policies of the BMJ.

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- Competing interests:** DM receives funding from the European Commission for an FP7 project (ALICE RAP) that focuses on rethinking addictions in Europe. He is also a director of Public Interest Investigations, a non-profit company which is behind two websites: spinwatch.org and powerbase.info. DM is a member of the UK Centre for Tobacco and Alcohol Studies, a UK Centre for Public Health Excellence (MR/K023195/1) funded by the BHF, CR-UK, ESRC, MRC, and NIHR, under the auspices of the UK Clinical Research Collaboration. SH: None declared.