**Alcohol researchers should not accept funding from the alcohol industry: perspectives from brief interventions research**

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INEBRIA is an international network of more than 500 researchers, policy makers, practitioners and other stakeholders interested in the potential of brief interventions in health and other settings to reduce the harms produced by alcohol and other drug use. It aims to provide global leadership in the development, evaluation and implementation of evidence-based practice in the area of early identification and brief intervention for hazardous and harmful substance use.

It is the INEBRIA view that the commercial activities of the alcohol industry pose a conflict of interest (COI) of such magnitude that any form of engagement with the alcohol industry may influence the independence, objectivity, integrity and credibility internationally of any researcher accepting any form of support for research activities. Any attention given by the industry to brief interventions is likely to be detrimental to evidence-based public health. Seeking or receiving funding from, and indeed having any relationships with the alcohol industry therefore should be discouraged. This includes any organisation that is industry funded, directly or indirectly, such as research funding bodies and public relations organisations which claim to be concerned with social aspects of alcohol in order to influence policy.

At its 2014 annual general meeting, INEBRIA decided to adopt a position statement with regards to the alcohol industry whose interests are in conflict with its aims and objectives. In the position statement the alcohol industry is broadly defined to include producers, distributors, sellers and marketers of alcohol, including any company that derives significant revenues from producing, selling or marketing alcoholic products ([1](#_ENREF_1)). The alcohol industry also includes beer, wine and spirit trade associations and social aspects and public relations organisations ([2](#_ENREF_2)). INEBRIA draws a distinction between alcohol industry activities within the state sector (eg alcohol retail monopolies) which are managed in the public interest, and those which are in the private sector, where the pursuit of profit motivates industry actions. The position statement is concerned with the latter.

While the focus of INEBRIA is on brief interventions for hazardous and harmful substance use, one of the objectives of the organisation is to promote integration of the study of brief interventions within the wider context of measures to prevent and reduce substance-related harm. From this perspective, the issue of industry relations and funding is considerably broader than brief interventions, and is applicable to all forms of alcohol research, indeed to all research involving consumption of hazardous products, including dependence producing substances, unhealthy food or gambling.

While membership of INEBRIA will not be contingent on non-receipt of funds from the alcohol industry, all current members have been invited to endorse the position statement, as will individuals wishing to join INEBRIA in the future. All individuals wishing to present at an INEBRIA meeting will also be required to complete a COI declaration for the work being presented. Members of the Co-ordinating Committee will also sign a COI declaration and may not have worked with or received funding from the alcohol industry, directly or indirectly, in the 5 years prior to their election date, or during their term of office.

The position statement is based on a report of a working group of members and invited experts convened to consider these issues in depth. The practical and ethical challenges associated with the acceptance of funding for clinical services and research are becoming increasingly complex in a context where research plays a greater role in the regulation and marketing of potentially addictive products. Since the publication of the WHO Global Strategy on Alcohol in 2010, the global alcohol producers have accelerated their “Corporate Social Responsibility” (CSR) activities, which in many cases conflict with the research and policy initiatives advocated by public health authorities (3). Such CSR activities are used in lobbying for industry-favourable policies, involving less regulation, contrary to evidence-based policies that have a wider population reach. It is reasonable that society should define corporations’ social responsibilities, rather than simply accepting that corporations should do so in their own economic interests.

In addition to the potential for bias in the design, conduct and reporting of research, industry funding for a particular topic may or may not be selected for scientific reasons. To the extent that funding for a particular research question is dictated by commercial reasons, it is likely to alter the research agenda of the recipient organisation or an individual (4).

While early identification and brief intervention shows efficacy on the individual level, there is as yet no evidence that it can achieve a noticeable population-level reduction in per capita consumption or alcohol-related harm unless accompanied by more effective alcohol control measures (5). Therefore, it is possible that the industry may promote and fund brief intervention activities because they pose little threat to their profits, as this offers an approach with a stronger evidential tradition than other alternative policy measures favoured by the industry, such as reliance on public education alone (6).

Concerns about industry attention to brief interventions were initially raised by industry-funded submissions to present at INEBRIA annual conferences, and by an industry funded programme to train every employee assistance clinician in the U.S. in brief intervention (7). We were also aware of industry using support for brief interventions in its efforts to thwart the evidence-based policy of minimum unit pricing of alcohol in Scotland (4). There have been wider concerns that the main effects of the alcohol industry’s cooperation with scientists and health professionals have been to improve their image with the public and with government policymakers, rather than to promote science (8, 9)

Several arguments have been advanced against accepting industry funding for such programs. These arguments can be summarised within Peter Adams’ (10) moral jeopardy framework, which is designed to assess a variety of risks involved with accepting funding from dangerous consumption industries. The PERIL framework (Purpose, Extent, Relevant-harm, Identifiers, Link) assesses a variety of risks based on a continuum of moral jeopardy, from minor involvements to major conflicts (11). INEBRIA finds industry funding or other support for brief intervention activities incompatible with the aims of the organisation. We encourage similar consideration of these issues among researchers in other fields, such as the cannabis (12) or gambling (13) fields, just to mention two areas of recent rapidly developing consumer interest following technological or policy changes, huge commercial interest, and lack of clear guidelines for researchers.

Consideration of industry funding for alcohol research is complicated by the argument that the industry should take some responsibility for the damage caused by alcohol. However, the amount of financial support and the nature of the programs supported in the area of brief intervention (e.g. time-limited, low-impact pilot programs) amounts to a trivial contribution to address the damage caused by alcohol. To the extent that the industry is deriving political benefit and improved public perceptions through these generally minimal contributions, the risks far outweigh the benefits and any association should be avoided.

Important lessons can be drawn from other fields where industry-funded research produces industry-favourable results. Drug research sponsored by the pharmaceutical industry is more likely to end up favouring the drug under consideration than studies sponsored by government grants or charitable organisations (14). Similarly, nutrition research sponsored by the food industry is more likely to end up favouring the food under consideration than independently funded research (15). Wallace (16) reported that interpretative bias played a role in the research funded by the tobacco industry claiming a genetic predisposition to lung cancer, and that studies tended to over-estimate genetic risk. Also, just as the tobacco companies have extensively used philanthropy as a political device (17 - 19), there is emerging evidence that the alcohol industry is behaving similarly with the funding of charities (20 – 22).

Brief intervention capable of initiating or supporting behaviour change is an alluring idea, and the evidence-base makes it attractive to scientists tackling other problems, as well as corporate vested interests seeking to influence science and policy, for reasons quite similar to those described here. For example, the gambling industry’s National Center for Responsible Gaming has made SBIRT a funding priority for 2015 (23). This indicates that the implications of these issues, and of our handling of them, are much wider, and deserving of attention. These issues are also complex, and require careful handling and well considered guidance. We know how useful expert advice has been, and we see much value in sharing our experience with other scientific organisations facing similar issues. We have already begun to do so with ICARA (the International Confederation of Alcohol, Tobacco and other Drugs Research Associations).

We will pay careful attention to further industry efforts to capture the science of brief intervention. For example, we note the recent endowment of a chair at Harvard Medical School in the name of Morris E. Chafetz, the founding father of brief intervention, by an alcohol industry body (with the agreement of the family) (24). There is an obvious ethical risk in accepting support from sources which have aims that largely oppose those of the receiving organisation. This is the core argument of the INEBRIA position statement. Accepting support from the alcohol industry will send a message that the industry is doing what it can to reduce alcohol related harm, and inadvertently weaken wider efforts to reduce the damage done to population health and society.

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