**How do we deal with a problem like the alcohol industry? Four lessons on how to protect science based on recent study**

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Researchers, clinicians, and policymakers generally agree that there is no place for the tobacco industry in public health science or policy. The same cannot be said for the alcohol industry (Marten et al., 2020), even though the industries are deeply connected in multiple ways, including in ownership, control, and political strategy (Bond et al., 2010; Hawkins & McCambridge, 2018; Lesch & McCambridge, 2022; McCambridge et al., 2022). Concerns have been raised for decades about alcohol industry scientific activity (McCambridge & Mialon, 2018), yet we do not know much about researcher experiences of encountering the alcohol industry in alcohol science. To fill this gap, we interviewed 37 alcohol researchers based in ten high-income countries. We found they all had some form of contact with the alcohol industry, whether or not they had sought such contact. Here we present four lessons based on our findings that could help protect science from industry interference.

**1) There is more to industry involvement in science than simply providing research money**

One of our earliest findings was that dividing researchers into those who have received industry money for research, and those who have not, conceals as much as it reveals. Relationships between researchers and industry existed on a spectrum, ranging from researchers initiating funding requests from industry to unwanted contacts by industry sources. The former includes seeking industry research funding early in one’s career (Mitchell & McCambridge, 2022b). This had long-term consequences, where initial funding led to more funding and other opportunities. A different kind of relationship ensues when established researchers perform advisory roles, or otherwise do work *for* industry, which can be paid or unpaid (Mitchell & McCambridge, 2022a). In our interview study, most of the researchers who were invited to perform such roles once their career was established described negative experiences, and had subsequently ended their associations. Towards the other end of the spectrum researchers who decide to have nothing to do with industry find this challenging to maintain because of the level of intrusion within science (Mitchell & McCambridge, 2022c). Industry is extensively involved in surveillance and monitoring of alcohol science, and for researchers who study the industry or produce findings that are contrary to business interests, harassment can result.

There are, therefore, many ways that industry are involved in science. Any measures to address industry scientific activity must recognise the multiple forms of involvement, not just industry research funding.

**2) Guidance for researchers is necessary, but limited**

Researchers typically rely on informal conversations with colleagues when making decisions about relationships with industry, to the extent that they call on any assistance at all. In our study we found that there was a lack of formal guidance – for example, from universities – on how to approach the issues associated with unavoidable contacts with industry (Mitchell & McCambridge, 2022c). Guidance for researchers about contacts with industry should include advice for different career stages, and should be evidence-based. We are limited, however, by the under-development of research on this topic. We do not know, for example, whether and how far the challenges posed by alcohol industry involvement in science are essentially the same, or whether they have distinct features from the threats posed by other industries. Although stronger guidance will be useful, it can only do so much, because researcher decision-making is shaped by the wider environment in which they work.

**3) Conflicts of interest in alcohol research are systemic problems requiring collective solutions**

In our study, the decisions researchers made about whether or not to work with industry were strongly influenced by their research environments. This included the influence by supervisors and other senior colleagues, as well as peer relationships with industry, particularly early in careers (Mitchell & McCambridge, 2022b). Limits to public funding, which was viewed by some as a bigger problem in some countries than others, also influenced decision making (McCambridge & Mitchell, 2022). When their careers were more established, researchers described trusting their colleagues who were inviting them to work with industry as a key part of their decision making (Mitchell & McCambridge, 2022a). For researchers who wanted to avoid industry, this was beyond their control to an extent – they reported finding it difficult to know whether industry would be in attendance at scientific and policy-related events (Mitchell & McCambridge, 2022c). These findings expose the limits of relying on individual researchers to make their own decisions about whether or not to have contact with industry. Environmental problems require collective solutions, and this requires institutional change, including addressing the lack of public funding available for alcohol research, how conferences are organised, and making explicit the norms that shape public interest research.

**4) Open, inclusive debates on conflicts of interest issues within and beyond alcohol research are possible, and necessary**

Debates in the peer-reviewed literature about alcohol industry involvement in science have been controversial, and often presented as researchers being either ‘for’ or ‘against’ industry. This has been an unhelpful binary. The reality is more complex, and the researchers we interviewed had many views in common, regardless of whether they had worked with industry (McCambridge & Mitchell, 2022). Opinions on the topic have changed over the years, and almost all of our interviewees thought that industry science activity had been damaging, both personally and more widely. These findings should help us be optimistic about our ability as a research community to address the problem, even though differences in views remain (McCambridge & Mitchell, 2022). Greater investment in research funding is clearly required to study this under-researched topic, including in low and middle-income countries.

We hope our findings will help promote further debate on the topic. We suggest they can also be used to support future efforts to find out how much what we think we know about alcohol may have been shaped by the alcohol industry. Examination of these kinds of issues pose difficult questions about the nature of alcohol science that can no longer be avoided.

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