

Why industry influence on research agendas must be addressed

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Industry influence on the research agenda—and the tactics employed by tobacco, pharmaceutical, food, mining, chemical and alcohol companies to drive questions away from those most relevant to public health—is the focus of new University of Sydney research published in the *American Journal of Public Health* today.

Members of the Evidence, Policy and Influence Collaborative from the University's Charles Perkins Centre conducted a scoping review of existing original research and systematic reviews that addressed corporate influence on research agendas across different fields.

Similar tactics across different industries

Of the 36 articles identified, 19 demonstrated industry tends to prioritise lines of inquiry that focus on products, processes or activities that can be commercialised and marketed.

Lead author Dr. Alice Fabbri, a postdoctoral research fellow in the University of Sydney School of Pharmacy, explained this was common for many fields, with similar outcomes.

"The medical industry tends to fund research on products with the potential to generate high incomes such as drugs and devices," Dr. Fabbri said.

"Meanwhile food industry-sponsored research typically focuses on single nutrients rather than dietary patterns, allowing companies to market manufactured products containing certain nutrients as beneficial to health.

"Neither are necessarily in the best interests of individuals or society, and potentially limits the scope of public health policies derived from this research."

An additional seven studies analysed internal industry documents from the tobacco, alcohol, sugar and mining industries, and provide insight into strategies used by industry to reshape entire fields of research, Dr. Fabbri explained.

"Key strategies include establishing research agendas that support industry policy positions and protect industry from litigation, as well as disseminating industry research agendas by engaging non-industry stakeholders through conferences, committees and other joint initiatives."

The final 10 studies explored researchers' experiences and perceptions of the influence of industry funding on research agendas.

"Receiving funding from industry was associated with a tendency to shift research agendas towards more applied research with commercial application," Dr. Fabbri said.

"However, there were mixed views on the role industry should play in shaping research agendas, which tended to be aligned with the acceptance of industry funding or not."

Coca-cola-funded research favours profit over public health

These findings are echoed in two recent papers examining the influence of Coca-Cola on the nutrition research agenda.

A review of food company-funded research identified a concerning lack of transparency, with just two companies analysed providing sufficient detail for analysis—Coca-Cola and the Mars Center for Cocoa Health Science. Along with a focus on single nutrient-specific research questions, over 40 percent focused on physical activity.

"This confirms previous findings from investigative journalism that exposed Coca-Cola's attempt to shift attention from the role of sugar-sweetened beverages in obesity to the role of sedentary behaviour," the

authors—all part of the Evidence, Policy and Influence Collaborative—wrote in a blog about their paper published in Public Health Nutrition.

Similarly, a *European Journal of Public Health* study found Coca-Cola-funded research in Spain serves the company's commercial objectives, and can be at odds with efforts to improve public [health](#).

"We believe the lessons learnt in Spain may be relevant and instructive for countries such as Australia, which also has not implemented a sugar tax despite recommendations from the World Health Organisation," co-author Dr. Juan Rey-Lopez, from the University of Sydney's School of Public Health and the Prevention Research Collaboration based at the Charles Perkins Centre, said.

Better strategies to ensure independence of research required

Co-author Professor Lisa Bero, group lead of the Evidence, Policy and Influence Collaborative and from the Sydney Pharmacy School, said the findings demonstrated the need for effective strategies to appraise and limit commercial biases in the research agenda.

"While it is self-evident industries will fund research on their own products or to support their own positions, these are not always aligned with [public health](#)," Professor Bero said.

"Disclosure policies must be expanded to increase transparency about the role industry plays in shaping research questions or promoting some research questions and discouraging others.

"Increased funding for independent research would also counteract

corporate influence, as would stricter guidelines regulating interaction with commercial entities.

"Individual researchers could also learn to recognise when genuine commitments to advance research are being hijacked by [industry](#) agendas and avoid participating in such initiatives."

More information: *American Journal of Public Health* (2018). [DOI: 10.2105/AJPH.2018.304677](https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2018.304677)

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