

Re. Sponsorship by Big Oil, like the tobacco industry, should be banned by the research Community

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To the Editor,

I write in support of the recent editorial by Kogevinas and Takaro [1]. When I was formerly President of the International Epidemiological Association we were faced with a similar dilemma with regards to potential sponsorship of a major conference. In response, I prepared a set of guidelines, based on those previously published by the American Public Health Association. These state that ‘overall, the purpose of the review is to determine the balance of the benefit to the public in relation to the risks and costs of collaborating with the funding organization’. More specifically, the guidelines state that ‘donations will not be accepted from tobacco companies, alcohol companies, and manufacturers of firearms and weapons of mass destruction’. Accepting donations from fossil fuel companies was not explicitly excluded, but in this particular case we decided not to accept such funding.

It seems that all or most of the authors of this correspondence (several of whom are greatly respected friends and colleagues of mine) would rule out accepting sponsorship from tobacco companies (although Kromhout’s letter [2] appears to imply that even this would be acceptable under the right conditions). This is well-accepted by most universities and public health organisations, because it is widely recognised that accepting such sponsorship, even with ‘no strings attached’, inevitably legitimizes an industry which has not only caused major public health damage, but has actively worked, over several decades to ‘manufacture doubt’ regarding the scientific findings on this issue. Thus, it would seem that the principle is accepted that some industries are ‘beyond the pale’ when it comes to sponsorship of public health conferences. This does not mean that we need to evaluate and oppose funding from each and every industry and country, since none will be perfect – holding conferences, and doing public health research always involves compromises – but it also does not mean that ‘anything goes’. We have to have some minimum standards.

Climate change is the great public health challenge of the 21st century, just as tobacco was in the 20th century. Ironically, the ‘climate change sceptics’ not only use the same arguments as

the ‘tobacco sceptics’, but in some cases are the same people with the same industry funding [3]. There is therefore a growing worldwide movement to reject ‘greenwashing’ sponsorship from the fossil fuel industry which merely serves to legitimize their tokenism. Sometimes (as in the case of tobacco), it is better just to disinvest, if ‘business as usual’ is not working. For example, there is increasing controversy in the United Kingdom regarding the sponsorship of the British Museum by BP – although the museum wisely chose not to put the BP logo on an exhibition of newly discovered arctic fossils which had come to light because of melting of the arctic glaciers; there is similar pressures for the Wellcome Trust and various UK universities to disinvest in fossil fuels.

Perhaps it is time for all public health organisations to recognise that times have changed and that accepting funding from fossil fuel industries in the 21st century is just as unacceptable as accepting tobacco funding was in the late 20th century (and still is today). Otherwise, public health organisations, which should be taking the lead on these issues, will find themselves on the wrong side of history.

References

1. Kogevinas M, Takaro T. Sponsorship by big oil, like the tobacco industry, should be banned by the research community. *Epidemiology* in press.
2. Kromhout H. Re: Sponsorship by big oil, like the tobacco industry, should be banned by the research community. *Epidemiology* in press.
3. Conway EM, Oreskes M. *Merchants of doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*. London: Bloomsbury, 2012.