

FEATURE



CONFLICTS OF INTEREST IN RESEARCH

Scientists take first steps to form united front over interactions with global food industry

Matthew Limb reports from a conference that sought to build bridges between scientists split over food industry funding of nutrition research

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Researchers in dietary public health are seeking to reach a new “consensus” agreement to define common rules for the way they engage with the global food industry. Leading figures say a framework of approved principles is needed to protect scientific integrity and avert harmful splits over what actions constitute conflicts of interest.

Many want food corporations banned from direct funding of public health research and to create a separate funding mechanism. Longer term ideas for funding include a tax on the big food manufacturers.

Around 70 researchers joined a meeting at Cambridge University on 11 December intended to start the process of building consensus. It was organised by the Centre for Diet and Activity Research, one of five UK centres of excellence in public health research.

The participants, almost all from the UK, included representatives from universities and charities, with some specialising in areas such as obesity, cancer, nutrition, and ageing. Participants observed the Chatham House rule, which mean speakers’ affiliations or identities aren’t made public.

Grey areas

The event identified key points of agreement and disagreement among researchers over engagement with the food industry. It also sought to explore challenging “grey areas” where uncertainty and ambiguity may leave scientists at risk of reputational damage and confuse health messages for the public.

There was a warning that without consensus the food industry would exploit the “vacuum of dissent.”

One participant said, “If we remain in this grey space, big industries are going to take advantage of that. There needs to be some kind of tactical response.”

Organisers said debate on this topic in medical journals was often polarised. They wanted to have opposing views out in the open and so began the meeting with a debate on the provocative motion, “Cooperation between researchers and the food industry

undermines credibility in science and weakens public health efforts to make diets healthier.”

Proponents argued that funding from corporations that were legally bound to maximise shareholder profits was “corrupting” science, often in subtle ways that many researchers weren’t fully aware of. This led to biased results, slanting the research agenda towards topics favoured by the food industry, such as individual choice, and thereby “subverting” the terms of policy debates.

There were calls for a “blanket prohibition” on direct funding for research from companies making ultraprocessed foods.

One speaker said, “Conflicts of interest are wa re compromising than widely recognised. We have to become more sophisticated in trying to understand these conflicts.”

Healthy relationships

Speakers against the motion said that cooperation between industry and researchers had yielded “unprecedented gains” to human development and human health.

They argued that even closer dialogue and scientific exchange, subject to the “necessary protections and oversights,” would lead to “healthier” diets becoming available to billions.

Participants broke into groups to discuss a series of statements about public health and the food industry. They unanimously  rejected the proposition that researchers should “never engage with the food industry at any level.” But despite this, more agreed than disagreed that “any association” between a researcher and the food industry risked reputational damage that undermined their scientific credibility.

A majority agreed that researchers need to identify those elements of the industry that are “open to a constructive dialogue about improving population health.”

There was no consensus about whether it is acceptable for researchers to receive funding or gifts in kind from the food industry for certain research related activities, such as giving lectures.

Attempts were made to pin down views on how common rules or principles might be framed and how these would be observed to avoid causing a new set of problems.

The framework idea was viewed as something the research community could produce itself in the short and medium term, while the “ambition” of a tax on corporations to fund research would require long term political engagement.

One example showed the different views on engagement with industry. The meeting heard how public health researchers were working with a major corporation to investigate the effect of consumers switching from full sugar drinks to “diet” versions.

For one researcher this was a good example of cooperation that would benefit people’s health, but another said it showed how industry “diverted attention” from “more effective” taxation measures.

One participant felt some experts seemed to have an “intuitive sense of what collaboration is intrinsically corrupting and what

isn’t. We really need to find a way of explicitly defining that boundary.”

Another speaker said, “There is no easy world in which science isn’t constrained by interests.”

One suggested, “We should have our cake and eat it in this debate. Why can’t we have both tighter regulation and cooperation?”

The organisers said the meeting was a “useful starting point” and they would now plan further consensus building.

Competing interests: I have read and understood BMJ policy on declaration of interests and have no relevant interests to declare.

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