

Clarification on Sponsorship of Health Professional and Scientific Meetings

The purpose of this online consultation is to gather relevant information from affected stakeholders and civil society to ensure the clarification is fit-for-purpose, acceptable and feasible, and to identify potential unintended consequences of this clarification for the implementation of WHO Guidance on Ending the Inappropriate Promotion of Foods for Infants and Young Children welcomed by the 69th World Health Assembly.

<https://apps.who.int/nutrition/publications/infantfeeding/manual-ending-inappropriate-promotion-food/en/index.html>

https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA69/A69_R9-en.pdf

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6. Is the meaning of the document clear?



Yes



No (add comments below)

7. Please explain what is unclear and / or make suggestions for making it clearer.

1. The document should include at least all the products under the scope of the Code, not be limited to BMS. Ideally, it should include any other product related to IYCF, even if not under the scope of the Code, because there are many other products that are detrimental to IYCF, or at least useless and meant to undermine the confidence of mothers and families on their capacity to provide good nutrition to their children. Just some examples: nutritional products for pregnant women (often made and marketed by the same BMS industry), products marketed to increase the production of breastmilk, products to protect and care for breasts and nipples, all sort of breast pumps with all sort of accessories, all sorts of nutritional fortifiers, etc. (the list is too long).

2. Manufacturers of BMS and products under the scope of the Code can hide behind other names. In some cases, it is easy to track them down (Nestlé and Danone Institutes, Gerber and Medela Foundations, etc.). Often times, however, it is difficult to know the real payer, for instance when a company is owned by another company that is owned by another company (Russian dolls), when a BMS company is owned or participated by another type of company (e.g. pharmaceuticals, any other health related firm), or when a supposed CSO receives funds from a company related to IYCF. If tracking down becomes impossible or hardly feasible, it would be a reason to forbid all sponsorships, not only those by manufacturers of products under the scope of the Code.

3. Even professional associations and service providers for events can hide behind strange denominations. Professional associations can be scientific societies, colleges, academies, orders and who knows what other terms are available for disguise in dozens of national languages. The document should clarify that all these are covered, not only those clearly identified as professional associations and service providers.

8. Is there some type of sponsorship that is not discussed in the document but should be?

Yes (add comments below)

No

9. Please explain what type of sponsorship is not discussed in the document but should be?

1. Hiring a space at a conference or course or other event means giving money to the organizers, irrespective of what is done within the hired space. As such, this should be clearly identified as sponsorship.

2. Sponsors may not finance an event, but may finance individual speakers and participants (travel, meals, accommodation, registration fees, speaker fees, etc.). This should also be listed as sponsorship.

3. The list of possible events does not include only congresses, conferences and courses. There may be meetings (local, national, regional, international) with different names and purposes that may be financed by industry. There was recently a meeting at the EU Parliament exactly on this issue of sponsorship; was it sponsored? were participants given travel and accommodation, or fees? We don't know, but it would be interesting to know. A definition of activities that could potentially be sponsored should be wide enough to include everything. Needless to say, online activities should also be included (we have examples of sponsored online courses during the 2020 lockdown in Italy).

10. Are there setting specific or contextual issues that should be considered?

Yes (add comments below)

No

11. Please explain the setting specific or contextual issues that should be considered and describe how the content could be changed to accommodate them.

The document seems to be focused only on the health care sector. Yet, sponsorship detrimental to IYCF can occur also in other sectors. For example, in Italy there are agreements between industry (manufacturers of BMS, but also of other foods and drinks) and the Ministry of Education for the financing of programs in primary and pre-primary schools. There are also Master degrees for health professionals, nutritionists, dieticians, etc. run by three universities (Rome, Milan, Palermo) in collaboration with Kraft/Plasmon (the second best seller of infant formula in the country). And we are sure that the food and drink industry, among them the two major global manufacturers of BMS, will grab any available opportunity to sponsor projects, programs and other activities in sectors other than health and education.

12. Are there implication for implementation or feasibility that we should consider?

Yes (add comments below)

No

13. Please describe the implications for implementation or feasibility that we should consider.

It is well known that most pediatric associations are openly in favor of continuing with their financial ties with manufacturers of products under the scope of the Code. See for example the paper by Bogнар et al (Frontiers in Pediatrics 2020; this position was presented at a recent meeting in the EU Parliament promoted by the European Academy of Pediatrics) or the project for hospital policies that ignore the Code recently presented by a number of Italian professional associations (<https://www.quotidianosanita.it/allegati/allegato1664443327.pdf>). An information note will have little effect on the position of most pediatric associations (it may have an effect on some non pediatric associations), because it does not represent an obligation. Unless this is translated into national, or better EU legislation, we think that little will change.

14. If there is something else you would like to say about the content, please write it in the box below.

We think that professional associations (and we suspect that they were pushed to do so by their sponsors) were very clever when they decided to send WHO and UNICEF queries regarding what sponsorship is and what it is not. By having an information note from WHO and UNICEF (a very weak tool, anyway) on what constitute sponsorship, they will immediately make a list of financing and marketing activities that are allowed and/or devise new ones that will fall beyond those listed in the note.