Invited commentary

What is the food and drink industry doing in nutrition conferences?

The purpose of this commentary is to start a new discussion about the relationship of the food, drink and associated industries – in particular, leading transnational food and drink manufacturers – with the organisers of nutrition science conferences. There is also reason for concern about the relationships of universities, other research centres and individual scientists with industry, but this is not discussed here.

Most conference organisers evidently now encourage an increasingly close relationship with industry – including organisations mainly funded by industry – as sponsors and also as co-organisers within conference programmes. Is this right? Or does such collaboration compromise the nutrition scientific community? It is time for us to step back and assess what is going on.

A current example is the forthcoming International Conference on Nutrition (ICN), organised in association with the International Union of Nutritional Sciences (IUNS), scheduled to take place in Bangkok this coming October. Open the ICN home page (www.icn2009.com) and you will see prominent promotion for sponsors such as Danone, Nestlé, PepsiCo, Unilever and Kraft, as well as the drug company Mead Johnson and the 'public–private partnership' Gain. Is this what the nutrition science community really wants?

How slippery is the slope?

The food, drink and associated industries, notably those whose profits depend on products that do not contribute to healthy diets, have over the years gained an increasingly powerful role in funding and also organising nutrition conferences. All of us who go to such conferences know this. Moreover, experienced conference participants are aware that some arrangements made by industry with organisers, or with speakers, are hidden. Such clandestine deals are obviously disreputable.

Where is the accountability of the organisers of scientific conferences? Why is there so little transparency in interaction with industry? How much damage is being done to the credibility of nutrition science as a profession? Conference organisers need to raise funds, and usually welcome sponsorships with evidently benign purposes, such as bursaries for young scientists. But do conferences really need additional money from industry to break even? Or do such funds mainly go towards supporting five-star hotel lifestyles for the organisers and prestigious speakers? Further, if money and support is needed from industry, why does this have to come from sectors of industry whose profits depend on products whose regular consumption often is harmful to public health? Why do organisers evidently not seek support from say the transport or insurance industry?

The need for rules of engagement

Conference organisers should follow guidelines for engagement with external actors, particularly the private sector. Such guidelines need to include how to deal with industry in a transparent way. They should emphasise the importance of openness, and resolve potential conflicts of interest. Thus, any conference sessions or presentations in which industry, including organisations mainly funded by industry, has a hand need to be explicitly identified as such.

Reasons to work with food, drink and associated companies include receipt of their support and resources, and influencing their policies and activities. Industry skills, experiences, resources and networks may indeed potentially be harnessed. Also, industry could be encouraged to be concerned about the growing industrialisation and commercialisation of food systems and supplies.

Engagement with industry should help to fulfil the purposes of nutrition research, public health nutrition programmes and activities, and public policy and programme development, in order to prevent nutrition-related damage to public health and to promote consumption of nutritionally adequate healthy diets. Such initiatives should accept and follow the food and nutrition priorities of national governments, independent professional bodies, and those of UN organisations such as those embodied in the WHO/UNICEF Global Strategy on Infant and Young Child Feeding[1] and the WHO Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health[2].

Why seek support from industry?

Engagement with industry presents both opportunities and risks. It is important to recognise this and to work to minimise risks. Professional nutritionists now usually

recognise the private commercial sector, especially the food, drink and associated industries, as important actors. Most professionals also believe that there is a need for sponsorship and other support from industry. However, some are critical[3,4], while others are arguing for a positive potential[5]. A popular proposal meant to meet challenges is to develop voluntary ethical guidelines[6]. Nutrition conferences, whether organised with the IUNS or by/with regional or national professional associations, should base their policy on internationally accepted principles and rules, such as those used by UN organisations[3,7] and some governments[8]. Any engagement between academic associations and the private sector should lead to the advancement of research and education in nutrition science, the promotion of learning though sharing of research knowledge, and improved professional practice, policies and actions.

Rules on engagement with industry must be unequivocal. Unexamined and uncritical links with industry will lead to loss of legitimacy because of perceived co-option by commercial interests. This will undermine strategic direction and long-term professional development strategies. Funding-driven activities are also liable to lead to fragmentation of public health nutrition research and higher education, and food and nutrition policies and programmes.

Like any other public policy, rules of engagement with industry need to be monitored and evaluated regularly. In our profession this should be part of the responsibility of the IUNS and its constituent bodies, and also of the United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition (UN SCN). The results of such appraisal need to be published regularly in an appropriate journal, such as *Public Health Nutrition.*

Monitoring and evaluation needs to include maintaining of records and of signed forms of conflicts of interest, and of all relevant reports. All these need to be available for public inspection on request. Making this clear from the beginning to potential collaborators is essential. Thus professional scientific associations should provide information concerning interactions with industry, include such information in reports and publish such reports on their websites, or at least make it available to members and to the public.

Conclusion

This commentary is not arguing against interactions between the nutrition science community and industry. But these need to be clear and accountable. We need to be professional when we engage in such interactions. Currently, nutrition societies and conference organisers are not acting professionally. As individuals, members of nutrition societies and participants in nutrition conferences, we currently have little or no say in what is going on.

An outside commentator, or a young scientist just entering the field, might well think that our profession has been hired by those industries whose policies and practices conflict with the interests of public health, and most of all by the food, drink and associated industries whose leading products contribute to unhealthy food supplies and diets. Are we part of the public health solution, or are we becoming part of the problem?

As a profession we need to draft, discuss and agree clear guidelines for interacting with the private sector. A good start is available on the website of the UN SCN[3]. In this context, the duty and responsibility of the IUNS and its constituent regional and also national adhering societies is crucial. Our profession must get its act together. We must prevent blunders such as clandestine agreements with industry, and avoid or lessen future risks.

The most essential part of such work is to foster accountability and transparency. A professional body that does not recognise this is doomed to fail. If we jeopardise our independence and credibility as scientists and as champions of public health, we betray our profession and its mission.

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