

COMMENTARY

Why we will not accept funding from Drinkwise

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Funding research and interventions to address the harms associated with alcohol use is a substantial challenge. Although alcohol-related harm has finally reached the awareness of many funding bodies, the resources available for countermeasures are pitifully small in comparison with the alcohol industry's advertising and lobbying budgets. In this context, the appearance of another source of funding is often welcomed by researchers and community organisations and it might be tempting to seek alcohol industry funding for a project despite the ethical risks of doing so. *Drinkwise* is the Australian version of the global alcohol industry-supported 'social aspects/public relations' organisations (SAPROs). Drinkwise was established in 2005 with \$5m from the alcohol industry and \$5m from the federal government. The organisation is still making grants from those original donations. Individuals and organisations are invited to apply for funding, although no formal funding rounds currently exist (P. Miller, pers. comm. 2008). The Drinkwise website includes only one incidental mention of its industry link in a personal description of the CEO in the 'experts' section.

The SAPRO have been developed by other purveyors of dangerous products, such as the gambling and tobacco industries [1,2]. The behaviour of such organisations is increasingly being scrutinised and documented and it is apparent that enhancing public health is not among their achievements. Funding relationships can have serious implications for recipients, as has been well documented in relation to funding

from the tobacco industry and some government agencies [3]. More importantly, however, are the effects of engaging with such funding agencies and thereby supporting their overall agenda of promoting ineffective industry friendly interventions (such as school education or TV advertising campaigns) while muddying the water around interventions which have a sound evidence base (such as higher taxes on alcoholic beverages) [4,5]. Some recent work has been carried out in this area and at least one decision-making model has been developed to help individuals, institutions and other interested parties [2]. Here we present the reasons why we would not accept funding from Drinkwise or other SAPROs.

Purpose

Adams [2] defines *Purpose* as the degree to which purposes are divergent between funder and recipient. Drinkwise's stated mission is to change the 'drinking culture' of Australia; its slogan is: 'Moderation is always in good taste'. On the surface, this goal appears similar to those of other organisations which work in the area. However, Drinkwise and its industry backers (whose representatives comprise six of the 10 Drinkwise board members) have consistently pursued an alternative set of goals [5,6]. The alcohol beverage industry strenuously opposed the introduction of random breath testing in the 1970s and 1980s [7] and opposed including standard drink labelling on alcohol beverage containers [8] so that consumers could measure their

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alcohol intake, a policy they have revised after forming the view that the labelling is used by young drinkers to work out value for money [9]. The industry commonly claims ‘that was then’ and that they are now better behaved [9], but their recent response to the ‘alcohol tax’, marketing a new beer-based replacement within weeks in an effort to undermine government efforts and retain a consumer group attracted to sweet drinks akin to cordial [10], is a truer indication of character.

Ultimately, the alcohol beverage industry and their SAPROs are commercial entities designed to maximise profit [11], a purpose which, in the case of marketing psychoactive substances, is incompatible with the public health. The industry would presumably argue that of course they are obliged to make a profit for shareholders and that their SAPRO-related activities show they wish to do this in a ‘socially responsible way’, for example, by helping create a climate in which moderate drinking becomes the norm. The position relies on the notion that moderate drinking enhances health, a claim which is increasingly difficult to sustain given new methodological research revealing systematic biases in the epidemiological studies which gave rise to this belief [12]. In addition, lobbying for ineffective industry friendly strategies and opposing effective supply control strategies cannot be considered socially responsible.

Independence

The SAPROs typically claim independence, using badges, such as ‘think-tank’ or ‘non-profit’ as smoke screens [13]. Such bodies often have individuals on the board or advisory committees who appear to the casual observer to be suitably qualified and independent. However, this is seldom the case. Most often, such individuals have a long history of accepting industry funding or sweeteners. Alternatively, they recruit people who are expert in an apparently relevant field of policy or research, but who are naive to the ethical risks arising from collaboration with such bodies [14]. Considering that six out of 10 members of the board are some of the most senior people in the Australian alcohol industry, any claim of a separation between the industry and Drinkwise could not be sustained.

Transparency

Notably, Drinkwise appears reluctant to inform newcomers of its industry links. On its website (<http://www.DrinkWise.com.au> accessed 18 December 2008), there is no declaration of ties with the industry, other than an incidental reference to the background of particular board members. This omission suggests they have something to hide. A telephone call to Drinkwise did not yield information on projects previously funded, any set

of funding criteria or guidelines, or access to an annual report (P. Miller, pers. comm. 2008). Without transparency in the allocation of funds, it is impossible to fully assess the organisation’s behaviour.

Evidence-based practice

Drinkwise describes itself as ‘an evidence-based organisation . . .’ (<http://www.DrinkWise.com.au> accessed 18 December 2008). However, Drinkwise’s focus to date has been on individually oriented research and on social marketing and education campaigns. An emphasis on such strategies, which are known to be ineffective, is consistent with the history of SAPRO activity internationally. As Anderson points out: ‘Systematic review after systematic review, including a review of 14 systematic reviews [15], has concluded that educational programs cost a great deal and appear to deliver very little in reducing consumption and alcohol-related problems’ [11]. This can lead to grant recipients spending time and resources on ineffective interventions and becoming dependent on this line of funding. To date, there is no evidence of Drinkwise funding research into measures (such as increased taxes) known to be effective, yet unpopular with its industry masters.

Social capital

Adams [2] stresses the importance of industry sources gaining credit for their investments. Alcohol industry funders are unlikely to contribute anonymously because for them a primary goal of the exercise is to be identified, to form a visible association with supposed public good activities for the purpose of positive branding. Drinkwise has been prominent in its name placement on sponsored TV advertisements, with the Drinkwise logo appearing for 3 s at the end of commercials when the main message of the advertisement is being conveyed. Arguably this is carried out for political and commercial purposes, allowing Drinkwise to show its involvement in high profile ventures, thereby building its social capital. In so doing, Drinkwise justifies its own existence and provides its industry masters with the opportunity to remind critics that they can’t be all bad because they fund Drinkwise.

Reputational damage

Adams [2] also identifies reputational damage as a risk when forming relationships with industry-backed bodies. Certainly, in many cases individuals and institutions who accepted tobacco money suffered serious damage to their reputations [16]. Changes in public attitudes towards alcohol in recent years [4] and increasing awareness of the industry’s disingenuous

behaviour might result in it being perceived in a similar, although perhaps less severe, light to the tobacco industry. We predict that researchers, institutions and community organisations will increasingly be asked to declare their position on the receipt of funding from various industries whose interests are at odds with the public good.

Conclusion

Like most university researchers and community organisations, we rely on short-term grants won from a small number of agencies in competition with our peers. The existence of bodies such as Drinkwise tempts researchers and community organisations to seek funding to address the very real alcohol-related problems in the community, placing them in an ethically risky situation. We encourage government to explicitly disassociate itself from Drinkwise and similar bodies, and as a matter of policy to fund organisations with a public health ethos and no conflict of interest. In addition, universities, community organisations and researchers should signal their unwillingness to validate Drinkwise and other SAPROs.

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