

## Vested interests, addiction research and public policy

With increasing frequency the editors of *Addiction* have been encountering situations where 'vested interests' seem to be complicating, if not impairing, the evolution of scientific research in the addiction field. To understand more clearly how vested interests affect research integrity in the addiction field, the editors of *Addiction* are commissioning a new series of papers to be published over the next 3 years. The purpose of this series is to advance our understanding of the ways in which organizations and individuals with 'vested interests' are able to affect public policy, scientific integrity and public health. In this issue, the first paper in the series documents alcohol industry attempts to implement industry-friendly policies across Africa [1].

### VESTED INTERESTS DEFINED

The label 'vested interest' applies both to individuals and to groups. Individuals may have a special interest in promoting a theory or distorting a finding for reasons of personal gain, as when the results of a drug trial are biased or fabricated by an investigator who stands to gain financially from the study's outcome. Vested interests can also apply to organizations that seek to control research findings for private benefit, as when the tobacco industry funds research on the measurement of second-hand smoke in order to delay tobacco control legislation, or the alcohol industry pays consulting fees to academics to write papers critical of evidence-based policy. When an individual or an organization seeks to influence research in order to advance private advantage, those with vested interests may benefit at the expense of the public good or scientific integrity. Governments can also have a vested interest in scientific research, as when science is misused to benefit a particular political agenda, ideology or favoured interest group [2].

The need to understand the role of vested interests in addiction research and policy has become particularly important, as traditional boundaries between academic institutions and for-profit organizations have become blurred in many countries as part of a general trend to make science more relevant to business applications and to provide revenues to academic institutions and governmental organizations. One consequence of these proliferating industry-academic-governmental collaborations has been the creation of real as well as apparent conflicts of interest. Conflict of interest is not in itself tantamount to wrongdoing, but it is a situation which needs to be declared.

A growing number of studies [3–6] and integrative reviews [7,8] has shown that conflicts of interest in health research are associated with biased research findings that favour commercial interests at the expense of patient welfare and public health. Although there is less evidence from the addiction field, there have been reports that parties with vested interests such as the alcoholic beverage, gambling and tobacco industries have engaged in a number of activities that have impacted upon the research agenda, public policy and public health. For example, studies have suggested that the tobacco industry has distorted scientific evidence systematically through its support of scientific research and the funding of sympathetic scientists [9–11]. Similarly, the alcohol industry and its surrogate organizations have been suspected of distorting the science base to promote alcohol policies that favour industry economic interests rather than public health [12].

The series we envision will describe different cases where industry sources and other groups or individuals with vested interests have influenced the policy process as well as scientific integrity. The individual reports will be summarized later for a critical and synthetic review of the overall enquiry, to be published in a future issue of *Addiction*.

### GUIDELINES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

First, prospective contributors should contact the Commissioning Editors for a concept review. Please describe your vested interest paper briefly in the following terms:

- i What was the process/history/context of this activity?
- ii How did the actions fit in with strategic directions of an industry, governmental organization or individual?
- iii What benefits were there for the parties with vested interest?
- iv Who was involved?
- v What triggers (events) were there for policy change?
- vi What were the major impediments to change?
- vii What are the lessons for future policy change?
- viii What methods will be used to describe your case (e.g. case-study methods, historical analyses, review paper, etc.)?

We have in mind pieces of not more than 3000 words including references. This initiative should be seen as a component of the journal's wider commitment to supporting trustworthy science. If you have a story to tell,

and can support it by facts and other documentation, we want to hear it.

#### Declaration of interest

None.

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