- annually disclose their council and board members’ financial links with industry (or the absence of these) on their organization’s websites;
- use their political clout to argue that restricting sponsorship and replacing it by public funding is in the public interest as it will help to keep public health research and decision-making impartial.

Enacting these suggestions may require public health associations to change their mode of operation. Some activities, particularly in the context of conferences, may have to be discontinued due to a lack of financial resources. If public health associations decide not to reject sponsoring, they should at least be completely frank and honest—merely declaring a potential conflict of interest will not suffice. Professional societies which accept industry sponsoring need to explain to the public that doing so is likely to affect their judgment; and that their advice in matters relevant to public health must therefore be taken with a pinch of salt.

Conflicts of Interest: HW and OR attended one or more EUPHA/EPH conferences; OR and KB attended one WFPHA World Congress.

References


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Critical discernment in collaboration with private partners

The University of Rummidge

Welcome to the University of Rummidge, the fictional university campus novelist David Lodge described in the trilogy Changing Places, Small World and Nice Work. These novels are a must-read for everybody who has qualms about scholars and industries becoming bed partners. It is the 1970–80s and government urges universities and industries to collaborate. It is as if you ask a fish and a bird to build a car. Lodge humorously describes how these two seemingly incompatible worlds get to know and even appreciate each other without losing a critical distance, understanding the mechanisms that drive both worlds. The recognition of the qualities and contribution of all parties involved is possible because people meet. The ‘industry’ becomes Vic Wilcox, the ‘academic’ has a name: Robyn Penrose. Visiting the world of the University of Rummidge does not result in an unreflective embrace of financial entanglement of academy and industry but gives a discerning perspective on the intricacies of a research world where academic freedom is confined by directives from the outside world, e.g. government policies. The novels equally challenge supporters of collaboration and objectors to these types of partnerships.

Four decades later, the novels have not lost any of their topicality. We continuously engage ourselves in exploring how to provide and present excellent research in a world where funding is not merely driven by academic curiosity. There is abundant evidence of how ‘he who pays the piper calls the tune’. In health research, ‘He who pays’ is usually identified to be the pharmaceutical industry or food industries (see Razum et al.). Public funding agencies seem to remain exempt of a similar scrutiny even though their agendas are not free of embracing a variety of interests.

Code of good European Public Health Association practice

European Public Health Association (EUPHA) is part of this reality and tries, like many other organisations, to deal with it in formulating guidelines for good practice. The code of good EUPHA practice (CGEP)1 is drafted because EUPHA recognises the power of money. As EUPHA has become an influential voice in the European public health world, it becomes an interesting partner for all kinds of parties. The CGEP clarifies EUPHA’s position to potential collaborators. The first line of the CGEP reads ‘to fulfill its mission, EUPHA must consider securing resources from external sources rather than relying on increasing prohibitively high member dues, conference registration fees and publication costs’. In a world in which public funding agencies either retreat or ask for collaboration with all kind of commercial partners, it is necessary to reflect well on what is acceptable without compromising its vision ‘of improved health and well-being and narrowing health inequalities for all Europeans’.

Two key principles guide EUPHA’s CGEP: transparency and independence—‘Transparency: information about the collaboration will be openly communicated; Independence: the collaboration will not compromise EUPHA’s mission’.

EUPHA’s mission is crucial for all of its activities. Some might argue that the mission is ambiguous and open to interpretation.
Inherent to EUPHA is the academic attitude: bringing together those people who continuously search for and research into what this ‘improved health and well-being’ is and how health inequalities can be reduced. This mindset of academic rigour applies on the one hand to practices, policies, teaching and research presented at European Public Health conferences, which EUPHA co-organises; and on the other hand to EUPHA’s own policies and practices.

EUPHA does not accept any compromise of its independence and is aware that both commercial and non-commercial (governmental and non-governmental, non-profit organisations) contributors may entail conflict of interest. Independence is shown in openly communicating about any entanglements. Transparency demands disclosure of all possible conflicts of interests. Being open about unrestricted grants is not a means of promotion for the grant givers. It is a sign of transparency. Speakers more and more are asked to start their presentations with the by now well-known ritual powerpoint slide mentioning conflict of interests. EUPHA...It would be good practice to have links to the professional pages of those active in EUPHA.

EUPHA publishes its financial accounts in a transparent manner on its website.


EUPHA is registered in the European Commission’s Transparency Register of European NGOs where details of its finances and possible conflicts of interest are given.

The EPH Conference of which EUPHA is initiator and co-organiser, will disclose possible conflicts of interests of its board members on its webpages as part of conditions for accreditation by the Union Europeene de Medicins Specialistes (UEMS).

Critical discernment of transparency

This kind of transparency is necessary but insufficient. We need a more critical appraisal of transparency. Jansen and Sulmasy1 have argued that disclosure requirements are needed in contexts in which one is presented as an expert, i.e. an authority whose message will be accepted based in his or her position; or when the research cannot be critically assessed by the audience. In situations when one is addressing peers disclosure of conflict of interests is secondary as peers are supposed to first look at the scientific merits of the evidence and in second instance look at whether this evidence might be compromised by conflict of interests. When peers turn this order around, they might get sidetracked by the default setting ‘privately sponsored research = flawed research’.

When for example the public health researcher acts as an authority disclosure of financial or other relationships that might compromise the judgement of the researcher is useful in assessing the reliability of what he or she claims. If, for example, a public health researcher is asked to give advice to politicians and policymakers about buying flu vaccines, this professional ought to reveal any ties that could influence the information he gives. Politicians and policymakers are no expert in the field of vaccines and rely on the information given them by the scientist. They see him as an authority and cannot assess to the fullest extent what is the scientific reliability of the data presented. Trustworthiness can be encouraged when the non-scientists know about the researchers’ affiliations.

When a public health professional is addressing his peers, he may expect that they can value his contribution by professional standards. In this case, disclosure is necessary but secondary. The primary task of colleague researchers is to assess the scientific merits of this research. Similarly, evaluation of sessions in conferences that have received unrestricted grants should be along these lines: what is its scientific merit? We should foster open discussion in which all parties involved identify their interests and open them up to scrutiny by their colleagues. When pre-conferences or workshops are enabled by unrestricted grants it is about facilitating exchange of insights, it is not about determining what these insights are supposed to be.

The power of gifts

Razum et al. rightfully warn for the mechanisms of gifts. They refer to the classic nineteen twenties’ study of Mauss who described how archaic societies kept a balanced society through gift exchange. The crucial conclusion from Mauss’ study is that the societies he studied had an intricate and sophisticated gift giving culture. Being part of these societies involved learning about the balance you needed to achieve between what you gave and what the receiver could return. There is always reciprocity: receiver must become giver and vice versa. Giving a gift the receiver cannot reciprocate is unacceptable as it disrupts the power balance. This seminal study of Mauss is no pamphlet against giving or receiving gifts. It is a thorough description and analysis of the power—both negative and positive—of gifts. EUPHA’s CGEP is a modern day version of the rules and guidelines that were immanent in those archaic societies. The CGEP is a living document that needs continuous revision in light of substantiated arguments. EUPHA realises it has an important gift to give to all kind of parties: public health scholars whose aim is organised skepticism,3 i.e. ‘a systematic search for knowledge whose validity does not depend on the particular individual but is open for anyone to check or rediscover’4 combined with an ongoing caveat considering the claims that can be made.

The University of Rummidge was a prophetic description of today’s reality: want it or not, policymakers force researchers and organisations like EUPHA to collaborate. We should neither be naïve about the interests of industries nor underestimate the critical power of academics. European Public Health (EPH) conferences are about giving the critical potential of the scientific approach to improved health and well-being and narrowing health inequalities for all Europeans a chance. Anybody who wants to be submitted to that scrutiny is welcome.

References


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