

Lifting the Veil of Secrecy

Corporate Support for
Health and Environmental
Professional Associations, Charities, and
Industry Front Groups

Introduction by Michael F. Jacobson, Ph.D.

Integrity in Science Project
Center for Science in the Public Interest
Washington, D.C.

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Introduction

Nonprofit organizations traditionally have been a bulwark of independent thinking and action in American society, a pillar of our democracy. Be they health charities, health-professional associations, or universities, they are usually considered to be objective and serving the public interest. And, indeed, over the years, organizations as disparate as the American Heart Association and World Wildlife Fund have made enormous contributions in their sphere of interest.

In recent decades, though, a new factor has crept, often secretly, onto the scene. Corporations, with their own motivations, have learned that they can influence public opinion and public policy more effectively by working through seemingly independent organizations rather than—actually, in addition to—under their own names. Their power to persuade is significantly enhanced when they can get an apparently independent nonprofit organization to advocate on their behalf. That's one reason we have seen tobacco, soft drink, and other besieged companies cozying up to nonprofit groups. People would be far more skeptical of a Corporate Polluters Lobbying Association than an industry-funded Harvard University Center on Important Issues. As one advertising company stated, "Gatorade uses the expert opinion of a university PhD—much better than just having someone from the company say it—to encourage more people to consume its sports drink." Similarly, companies hope that a nonprofit's or university's good name will burnish their reputations. Call it "innocence by association."

Most nonprofit groups welcome corporate support. The funds allow them to have a higher public profile (which may translate into increased donations), hire new staff, and expand their programs. However, notwithstanding insistence by both the donors and the recipients that such grants come with no strings attached, a price usually is paid for accepting corporate largesse. That payment may be in the currency of credibility and independence.

Medical-professional organizations and health charities are among the biggest recipients of industry funding. Drug and other companies open up their wallets with alacrity to such groups to publicize and give credibility to the companies' high-profit products.

In 1997, for instance, the American Medical Association generated a firestorm of outrage when it agreed to a scheme endorsing products made by the Sunbeam Corporation. The five-year agreement would have placed the AMA's logo on a line of thermometers, blood pressure monitors, and other home healthcare products and generated millions of dollars in royalties for the medical group. Unfortunately, the AMA hadn't even evaluated the quality and cost of the products. Many AMA members were outraged, and the AMA became engulfed in a widely publicized scandal. Ultimately, more-sober-minded AMA members forced the departure of five of the group's executive leadership and scotched the deal. But that didn't stop Sunbeam from suing the AMA for breach of contract and winning a \$9.9 million settlement. (Around the same time, the AMA issued a statement that was supportive of Procter and Gamble's fat substitute olestra. That support, though, began to look more like a quid pro quo than an independent scientific judgment when the Chicago Sun-Times discovered that the AMA was negotiating with Procter and Gamble to pay

\$800,000 to sponsor an AMA fitness program.)

Medical conventions sometimes end up looking like trade shows, because of massive corporate support. According to a *Washington Post* article on the role of industry in medical meetings, “in several dozen symposiums during the week-long [American Psychiatric Association] meeting, companies paid the APA about \$50,000 per session to control which scientists and papers were presented and to help shape the presentations.” The 2002 Annual meeting had a total of 42 industry-sponsored symposiums sponsored by Abbott Labs, Eli Lilly, Pfizer, Novartis, and others.

In 2003, the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, a small professional association, accepted \$1 million from Coca-Cola. The academy became a laughing stock when the public (and its members) learned of the deal—imagine, an organization ostensibly concerned about children’s teeth taking money from arguably the world’s biggest producer of sugary foods. But the situation got worse when AAPD President David Curtis defended his group. He stated: “Scientific evidence is certainly not clear on the exact role that soft drinks play in terms of children’s oral disease.” That was quite different from the group’s previous position:

However, frequent consumption of sugars in any beverage can be a significant factor in the child and adolescent diet that contributes to the initiation and progression of dental caries. Additionally, the acids present in these beverages can have a greater deleterious effect (erosion) on enamel than the acids generated by oral flora from the sugars present in the drinks. Many soft drinks also contain significant amounts of caffeine which, if consumed regularly, may lead to increased, even habitual, usage.

What a difference a million dollars makes! And what a coup for Coca-Cola, turning a potential opponent into an ally. You can bet that the AAPD will not be terribly supportive of measures to reduce soft-drink consumption. At best, it probably will be silent on such matters. At worst, it will support its generous new friend. While Coke’s contribution supposedly is no-strings-attached, what generally guarantees good behavior by recipients of corporate funding is not a contract requiring fealty at every turn, but a desire for more, and increased, funding in the future. And it may be just about as useful to Coca-Cola to silence a potential opponent as to have a dental group actively telling people to drink soda pop.

Associations of minority health professionals are much smaller than their mainstream counterparts and have greater difficulty raising money. That makes them especially vulnerable to corporations. Thus, in a recent year the Association of Black Cardiologists obtained 80 percent of its \$5 million budget from the drug industry. In 2000, the group received \$2.2 million from Bristol-Myers Squibb.

Professional associations may claim that they are concerned about the public interest, but, understandably, their primary mission is to advance their members’ interests. And their members’ interests sometimes conflict with a

broader public-service function. For instance, the 70,000-member American Dietetic Association focuses primarily on increasing the credibility and income of dietitians, many of whom work directly for, or serve as consultants to, food companies. That immediately raises conflict-of-interest issues, because what is good for the public may not be good for the ADA's book balance and many companies. The food industry sees the ADA as a vehicle for reaching the hearts and minds of dietitians and the general public. Thus, many major food companies—from Mars to Gerber—contribute to the ADA, advertise in its journal, and exhibit at its annual meeting. They also sponsor “fact sheets.” The National Soft Drink Association sponsors the fact sheet on soft drinks. The biotechnology industry sponsors a fact sheet on agricultural biotechnology. McDonald's sponsors the fact sheet on “Nutrition on the Go.” Ajinomoto, the maker of MSG, sponsors the fact sheet on “Food Allergies and Intolerances.” The fact sheets typically are written by corporate PR firms and are lightly veiled defenses of the sponsors' products or practices. At least, though, the fact sheets do disclose who funded them.

Even an organization of medical journalists has gotten in on the drug-industry gravy train. The American Medical Writers Association (AMWA), which calls itself the “leading professional organization for biomedical communicators,” has received funding from the likes of Eli Lilly, Abbott Laboratories, and Pfizer. One would think that journalists would studiously avoid entanglements with special interests. It could get pretty dicey for a journalist to be trying to write an objective story while encouraging a company to support his or her organization. But, in this case, maybe objectivity is not the goal for AMWA members, considering that many of them do PR for drug and other companies.

(Be sure not to confuse the AMWA with the AMWA—the American Medical Women's Association. That group also gets funding from the likes of Eli Lilly, Abbott Laboratories, and Pfizer. The women's medical group used to sponsor a Product Acceptance Program that, in exchange for \$25,000, allowed packages of vitamin pills and other products to be emblazoned with an “AMWA Approved” label.)

Companies have no confusion about professional associations: They see them as Trojan Horses that they can use to promote sales and influence public policies. To cite one of many examples, veterinarians have their American Veterinary Medicine Association (AVMA). But, equally, makers of animal drugs see the AVMA as a means of advancing their interests. A “landmark day” for the president of the AVMA was when drug-giant Bayer announced a “long-range, five-year financial commitment to the AVMA.” AVMA appears to have reciprocated by defending the routine feeding of antibiotics to healthy animals, a great profit center for the antibiotics industry, but a cause of antibiotic-resistance in bacteria, a phenomenon that reduces the effectiveness of such drugs when used to treat food-borne illnesses in humans.

Health charities—like the cancer society and heart association—are distinctly different from professional associations. The charities are often founded by two groups with symbiotic interests: victims of various diseases and researchers who study potential cures. In a further symbiosis, companies that make drugs and medical devices often are major supporters. Who better to

support, say, the American Diabetes Association than companies marketing existing treatments and investigating new ones? Thus, that group has received contributions of \$750,000 or more from such companies as Abbott Laboratories, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Eli Lilly, GlaxoSmithKline, and Merck. If one of those companies' drugs was discovered to have serious side effects, it's unlikely that the association would be first in line to blow the whistle. It's all too easy for donors and recipients to develop a mutually back-scratching relationship that translates into "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil."

The American Diabetes Association is also a beneficiary of "cause-related marketing"—in which companies boost their images and profits by supporting worthy causes. That's what's behind the proliferation of 10K runs and bike-a-thons sponsored by drug, liquor, and other companies. For a price between \$25,000 and \$100,000, Kraft, General Mills, and Quaker have sponsored "aisles" in the diabetes association's "virtual supermarket" on its web site. Even though the association denies that it is endorsing the brand-name products featured on its virtual shelves, it's hard to see that activity as something other than product promotion.

Another health charity, the Arthritis Foundation found itself in the headlines, in an unwanted way, after it licensed its name to McNeil Consumer Products. The company marketed aspirin, acetaminophen, and ibuprofen under the Arthritis Foundation brand name. Of course, they were just neatly packaged versions of the common drugs, but they generated \$2 million in income for the foundation. A coalition of Minnesota and 18 other state attorneys general sued McNeil and won a \$2 million settlement in 1996 for implying that the products were new medications created by the foundation. Minnesota Attorney General Hubert Humphrey said, "When a nonprofit's credibility is sold for profit, the public has a right to know who's behind the name, what's inside the product, and where the money is going."

Charities generally portray themselves as vigorous proponents of the public interest, helping victims, seeking cures, and investigating preventive measures. But taking corporate donations puts enormous constraints on an organization's activities and raises questions about a group's objectivity and independence. For instance, does a group like the American Cancer Society not focus on dangers of chemicals or pollution because of funding it receives from DuPont, BP America, Alabama Electric Cooperative, and similar companies? What about the American Heart Association's acceptance of funding from the National Cattlemen's Beef Association—might that be a small reason for its lack of zeal in promoting diets that prevent heart disease? And might the fact that the heart association receives more than \$2 million a year by certifying brand-name foods reduce the group's ability to criticize products? Corporate funding is likely a reason that some health charities focus on cures and forget about prevention.

Relatively benign image-enhancing relationships may be converted into protective shields when circumstances dictate. For instance, the Society for Women's Health Research played a major role in stimulating government sponsorship of research on women's health. But a decade down the line, according to the *Washington Monthly*, the group vigorously defended the pharmaceutical company Wyeth, which markets the most widely used hormone replacement therapy (HRT), when a major new study proved that the dangers of

long-term use of HRT outweighed its benefits. Wyeth has given donations as large as \$250,000 to the association and was the “Grand Benefactor” of the society’s 2003 annual gala. The society also has lent its name to a multi-million-dollar campaign by one of its sponsors, Novartis, to market a drug for irritable bowel syndrome.

Health charities and professional organizations typically retain a substantial degree of independence and undertake worthy projects, even while they receive funding from dubious donors. Having much less credibility are the organizations that corporations create from scratch. Those organizations often have beneficent-sounding names, like the International Life Sciences Institute (funded by food and chemical companies), the Coalition for Animal Health (funded by the cattle, hog, and other agribusinesses), the Center for Consumer Freedom (funded initially by a \$300,000 grant from Philip Morris, but which now receives much of its funding from the restaurant industry), the Foundation for Clean Air Progress (funded by the petroleum, trucking, and chemical industries), and the American Council for Fitness and Nutrition (funded by food manufacturers). Their corporate affiliations are sometimes hidden or mentioned only in the small print at the back of the brochure. Such groups pretend to be serving the public interest by publishing pamphlets, holding conferences, sponsoring research, or appearing on television shows. But scratch the surface and all semblance of independence and objectivity vanishes. Those are plain and simple industry front groups. Their whole *raison d’être* is to advance their corporate sponsors’ interests.

Somewhere between health charities and industry front groups are organizations that were not complete creations of corporate interests, but that rely largely on corporate support. They claim to be independent, but much of what they do is consistent with their sponsors’ interests. One prominent example is the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH). It receives funding from foundations, as well as corporations. But don’t let that foundation funding fool you. Much of it is from right-wing foundations that have pro-business agendas. The industry funding wouldn’t fool you either, if you knew about it—a decade ago the group stopped disclosing its sources of funding. But according to ACSH’s 1991 annual report, major funders include chemical companies, food companies, oil companies, energy companies, and auto companies. Not surprisingly, ACSH devotes much of its energy to trying to debunk concerns raised by environmental and consumer groups. It downplays risks of air and water pollution, poor nutrition, dangers of pesticides, global warming, and other problems. The group speaks out on concerns related not just to its current donors, but also to other companies, perhaps in the hope that its utterances lead to new funding. In other words, every whitewash serves both as a repayment and as a marketing tool (and, to be fair, as an expression of the group’s apparent actual beliefs).

Another such organization is the International Society for Regulatory Toxicology and Pharmacology (IS RTP), which serves to “inform and educate scientists, policy makers, the media and the public about the scientific issues affecting the regulatory process.” IS RTP publishes the scientific journal *Regulatory Toxicology and Pharmacology*. Perhaps it shouldn’t surprise one that its sponsors include Dow AgroSciences, Eastman Kodak, Gillette, Merck, Procter and Gamble, RJ Reynolds Tobacco, and other corporations that have an interest

in weakening government regulations of toxic chemicals. The journal's editorial board is dominated by industry lawyers and scientists who consult for industry. In one egregious episode, the journal's editor was paid \$30,000 by the tobacco industry to write a paper—which was published in the journal—downplaying the risks of second-hand smoke.

University affiliations are particularly effective surrogates for propagating industry's views, helpful in burnishing companies' reputations, and giving companies access to respected faculty members. The most notorious such group is the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis. It was launched primarily with gifts from Bethlehem Steel, British Petroleum, Coca-Cola, Dow Chemical, Merck, Monsanto, and a dozen other companies. It now gets funding from everyone from AT&T Wireless and the California Avocado Commission to the Chemical Manufacturers Association and the Chlorine Chemistry Council, as well as the government. Its studies generally exonerate technologies alleged to cause problems and provide academic back-up for corporate initiatives in beating back government health and safety rules. No surprise that the director, John D. Graham, would beg Philip Morris for \$25,000, saying, "I would like the opportunity to meet with you personally....It is important for me to learn more about the risk-related challenges that you face."

Other university-based groups include:

- Center for the Study and Improvement of Regulation is housed in the Department of Engineering and Public Policy in the Carnegie Institute of Technology. It is funded by several corporations, foundations, and trade associations including: Exxon, Ford, Alcoa, the Chemical Manufacturers Association, and the American Petroleum Institute.
- Center for Food and Nutrition Policy was started at Georgetown University and is now at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. This "independent, nonprofit" group does not disclose just who its backers are, despite claiming that it has a "full disclosure" policy. (In fact, it has received funding from the Grocery Manufacturers of America, the Animal Health Institute, the Sugar Association, and other food and drug companies and trade associations.)
- The Vanderbilt University Medical Center's Institute for Coffee Studies was established with funds from the Association of Coffee Producing Countries, the National Coffee Association of the U.S.A., and the All-Japan Coffee Association. Also, it received \$275,000 from Kraft-General Foods, the maker of Maxwell House coffee. The institute unapologetically states that its mission is to "study the possible health benefits of coffee." It would be amusing to know what this university-based organization would do if, heaven forbid, it discovered a health problem caused by coffee.
- Mercatus Center at George Mason University is "an education, research and outreach organization [working] with scholars, policy experts, and government officials to bridge academic learning and real world practice." Its funders have included Enron, International Paper, Microsoft, Pfizer, Xerox, and other corporate giants. The Mercatus

Center has opposed federal actions on arsenic in drinking water, labeling of trans fat (which causes heart disease) in food, and other public health and environmental measures.

As a few examples from the United Kingdom demonstrate, the co-optation or use of nonprofit organizations by industry is not limited to the United States, but probably occurs wherever industry feels threatened by government activities.

- The British Dental Association rents out its logo to companies, but in 2001 got burned on an endorsement of Ribena Toothkind drink, which is made by SmithKline Beecham. The company had paid the association £55,000. The British High Court ruled that Ribena misled consumers by claiming that “it does not encourage tooth decay.” In fact, the drink contains sugar and does promote tooth decay.
- In 2000, the British Heart Foundation let Nestlé use its logo as part of the charity’s program to raise £250,000. Nestlé was fined three times that amount for advertising that its Shredded Wheat would reduce the risk of heart disease, a violation of Britain’s food-labeling laws that prohibit medical claims.
- The British Nutrition Foundation says little about the harmfulness of trans fat and salt, matters of concern to most health experts. That foundation is funded largely by McDonald’s, Nestlé, British Sugar, Cadbury, the Meat and Livestock Commission, Unilever, and others.

With units around the globe, the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) is another story. It was founded in 1978 “to work toward a safer, healthier world.” The question is, safer and healthier for whom? ILSI was founded by major coffee and soft-drink makers, including Coca-Cola, Procter and Gamble (Folger’s coffee), Nestlé, and Kraft Foods (Maxwell House Coffee), as well as many other companies. They were stirred into action by criticism of caffeine and the major caffeine-containing foods: coffee and soft drinks. The group sponsors conferences and sends scientists to government conferences to represent industry’s take on controversial issues. To a degree unusual in the normally genteel world of science, ILSI has been harshly criticized by the World Health Organization (WHO) for its lobbying and other practices. The WHO chastised ILSI for “the failure to fully disclose ILSI’s funding sources,” advocacy of “public health policy directions...that are counter to accepted nutrition policy (especially related to obesity, alcohol, caries and chronic disease causes and means of control); and a perception that many of [ILSI’s] developing country partners and recipients of funds are unaware of ILSI’s [industry] funding base.” WHO greatly restricted ILSI’s interactions with the WHO.

Nonprofit organizations, at least those that wish to be truly independent, need to grapple with the issue of corporate funding. Some—such as Consumers Union, Public Citizen, and the Center for Science in the Public Interest (the publisher of this report)—have rejected all such funding. Others believe that they can maintain their independence even while receiving industry funding, sometimes adopting policies to aid that effort. And others simply may not care what the public or their members think of accepting money from businesses. At

the very least, though, the public has a right to expect that all nonprofits and their top officials disclose, in their annual reports, studies, and web sites, as well as when appearing in the media or giving speeches, their sources of funding. Doing so would allow the public to understand better some of the influences and constraints on the organizations. Unfortunately, many organizations (such as the Center for Food and Nutrition Policy and the American Council on Science and Health mentioned above) refuse to disclose their funders. In addition, the public needs to recognize that money is not always corrupting and that just because a group receives industry support does not mean that it is “in bed with” industry. Such industry groups may have some excellent publications, sponsor quality research, and make valid criticisms of some activists and public policies.

* * *

This report is intended to begin lifting the veil of secrecy that conceals the extent of corporate support of, and potential influence on, organizations concerned about science, health, and the environment. It is far from complete, both in terms of all the industry funding that listed organizations receive and of all the organizations that receive industry funding. It does not include most ordinary trade associations, like the Society of the Plastics Industry and the National Coffee Association, which we presume are generally understood to represent industry’s interests. Furthermore, usually it is not possible to know how much, and what percentage, of an organization’s funding derives from industry. The listings also generally do not list non-industry sources of support, such as members, foundations, or government; in many cases, such support comprises the bulk of the groups’ incomes. The information in this report was generally obtained from annual reports, news articles, web sites, and other public sources, as indicated in the citations.

The content of this report is available, and regularly updated, on the Internet at www.IntegrityInScience.org. (Information about corporate support of professors also is available at that web site.)

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