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UK's anti-lobbying clause risks jeopardising public health, warn experts

New rules could privilege those working to influence policy on behalf of commercial interests

A move by the UK government to stop lobbying by tax funded bodies could have a serious impact on public health, warn leading researchers in **The BMJ** today.

Dr Katherine Smith at the University of Edinburgh and colleagues say this “seems to conflict with the pursuit of public health goals, which often require ensuring policy makers are aware of the implications of research.”

The new clause, announced by Cabinet Office minister Matthew Hancock last month and to be inserted into all new and renewed grant agreements from May, forbids the use of government funds for lobbying.

The Cabinet Office said the new clause would mean funds are spent on improving people's lives and good causes, not on "activity intended to influence – or attempt to influence – parliament, government or political parties."

Two reports by the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) appear to underlie the clause, both presenting sustained critiques of public health advocates and researchers, explain the authors.

The IEA's position is that only money raised through sources other than taxation should be used to influence government spending. The authors argue that, in effect, "this privileges private sector views, some of which clearly run counter to public health."

The new clause is also likely to undermine efforts to encourage researchers to engage with policy makers and practitioners, they add.

For example, they describe how researchers who found that NHS organisations with private finance initiative contracts had higher capital costs than those without such contracts, "worked closely with several parliamentary committees ... to ensure that the research had informed legislative opinion and impacted on its decision-making."

The purpose was to reduce costs to the public purse, and yet the new clause "seems to rule out this kind of work unless academics are funded by sources other than the government," they warn.

They conclude: "The need to improve the use of scientific evidence in policy making is clear; this clause limits government funded researchers' ability to help achieve this, privileging those working to influence policy on behalf of commercial interests."

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Note to Editors

Editorial: The pursuit of ignorance

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