



LETTERS

THINK TANK FUNDING

Financial transparency: necessary but not sufficient

David B Menkes *academic psychiatrist*

University of Auckland, Waikato Clinical Campus, Hamilton 3240, New Zealand

As Coombes says, right wing think tanks are beholden to their funders and repay their patronage with “free market” advocacy.¹ That such advocacy is often at odds with public health is unsurprising, given its usual opposition to environmental protection and the regulation of commodity industries, including those producing junk food, alcohol, and tobacco.² The tabloid press is, often incoherently, willing to join cries against “nanny state” restrictions on the availability and promotion of such products.³

The *BMJ* sensibly advocates full disclosure of think tank funding as a prerequisite for participation in public debate.¹ But this is unlikely to be enough for two reasons. First, although the requirement for declaring conflicts of interest has become the norm in academic publishing, such disclosures are frequently misleading and use euphemistic language.⁴ Second, and more fundamentally, disclosure of financial interests is not enough to mitigate bias and, perversely, may even aggravate it.⁵ In this context, one can see the proud declaration of corporate funding

by a New Zealand think tank sitting comfortably alongside its enthusiastic free market agenda.⁶

Transparency around conflicts of interest is, quite simply, inadequate to protect public health in a market driven economy.

Competing interests: None declared.

- 1 Coombes R. Think tanks should come out of the shadows. *BMJ* 2019;365:l221210.1136/bmj.l2212.
- 2 Hawkins B, McCambridge J. Industry actors, think tanks, and alcohol policy in the United Kingdom. *Am J Public Health* 2014;104:1363-9. 10.2105/AJPH.2013.301858 24922137
- 3 Coggon J. The nanny state debate: a place where words don't do justice. Faculty of Public Health, Nov 2018. <https://www.fph.org.uk/media/2009/fph-nannystatedebate-report-final.pdf>
- 4 Menkes DB, Masters JD, Bröring A, Blum A. What does 'unpaid consultant' signify? A survey of euphemistic language in conflict of interest declarations. *J Gen Intern Med* 2018;33:139-41. 10.1007/s11606-017-4225-5 29181787
- 5 Wilson M. Is transparency really a panacea? *J R Soc Med* 2014;107:216-7. 10.1177/0141076814532744 24912788
- 6 The New Zealand Initiative annual report 2018. Wellington; 2019. <https://nzinitiative.org.nz/reports-and-media/reports/annual-report-2018/>

Published by the BMJ Publishing Group Limited. For permission to use (where not already granted under a licence) please go to <http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/permissions>