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OPEN LETTER

A call to the European Congress on Obesity: It's time to remove corporate sponsorship

The European Congress on Obesity in May 2023 (ECO2023) is one of the major global conferences for clinicians, practitioners, physicians, nutritionists, surgeons, and researchers in the field of obesity.¹

One of the five initial principal sponsors of ECO2023 was Pronokal,² a weight loss brand owned by Nestlé, one of the world's largest food companies.³

Diet related diseases are associated with the consumption of industrially processed, packaged foods, in particular ultra-processed foods⁴ made by food companies such as Nestlé. According to Nestlé, more than half of its main portfolio is rated unhealthy by widely agreed nutritional rating systems.⁵

Nestlé's sponsorship of this academic congress brought condemnation on social media.⁶ The Nestlé logo was subsequently removed from the list of sponsors, and the Pronokal subsidiary brand disappeared later the same day. Despite the presence of the Nestlé logo on their website ECO2023 explained that they did not know about Pronokal's ownership.

The sponsorship of an obesity conference by such a large food company is an especially egregious example of corporate influence on science, but this instance illustrates a systemic problem.

Other corporate actors also dominate the sponsorship of clinical scientific meetings. ECO2023 is sponsored by pharmaceutical companies such as Boehringer Ingelheim and Lilly. In Latin America, a recent study found that 88% of nutrition conferences have some form of industry involvement.⁷

The presence of corporations at clinical scientific meetings and health events can take various forms. For €85 000 "major sponsorship" at ECO2023 includes a sponsored symposium, exhibition space, exhibitor and delegate registrations, invitations to the speakers' dinner, a full page colour advertisement, a half page company profile in the congress programme, acknowledgment on the ECO2023 website, and first choice of all other sponsorship opportunities including the company logo on delegate bags, branded lanyards, and screens and signage round the congress.

As well as logo visibility, corporate representatives may participate as attendees and speak at sessions. The organising committees for ECO2023 also have a representative from industry (National Dairy Council, which represents the dairy sector). All these activities serve to normalise the presence of corporations at scientific events.

This is a problem for several reasons. Firstly, it is important to recognise these corporate activities for the marketing strategies that they are. Nestlé was a

pioneer in medical marketing,⁸ and its carefully cultivated relationships with health professionals have previously been shown to advance the industry's interests. This is no secret, as ECO2023 states in the brochure for prospective sponsors: "You can tailor your marketing strategy by purchasing individual sponsorship items to suit your specific needs. We will be happy to work with you to maximise the return on your investment by helping you to pick from the list of individual sponsorship items, to create a successful package for your organisation. Further to this, any additional ideas that you may have to promote your products and services are welcome for consideration."⁸

Corporations have a legal duty to make a profit from the sales of their products. Marketing is a key vehicle for that. Corporations use scientific events to protect and enhance their reputation and develop a network of credible partners.⁹ Corporations have their own events and professionals are free to attend these, but must understand that the information provided might be biased.^{10 11} Health events should not be a platform for marketing. It is also important to note that corporate actors from the food industry often shift the blame onto individuals regarding obesity, but here are paying to be legitimate actors in health events.

Secondly, the presence of corporations at ECO2023 (and other health events) risks tarnishing the reputation of health professionals and academics attending the event. It also compromises their integrity, loyalty, and independent judgement. Individuals and professional associations may be less likely to criticise commercial sponsors who are providing them substantial funding and resources.¹² There is ample evidence that interactions with the pharmaceutical industry unconsciously influence health professionals, creating biases towards the prescription of pharmaceutical products and medicines.¹³

Thirdly, there is an imbalance of power with corporate sponsorship at events like ECO2023. While there is space for corporate actors who have the means to pay for it, less well resourced groups (such as patients, civil society organisations, and others) do not have the same prominent space in the programme and privileged access to speakers. Accepting such sponsorship from the industry promotes a market based approach to preventing and treating obesity. It is a missed opportunity to take a human rights based approach to these matters.

Solutions have been identified to deal with the problem of corporate influence on public health policy, research, and practice.¹⁴ We propose that the

following strategies could be adopted by the organising committees of future scientific meetings and health events:

- Organising committees should be fully independent, with no conflicts of interest
- Organising committees should have publicly available policies on sponsorship and other forms of industry involvement
- Health professionals need education and training about these matters. It is encouraging to see sessions at ECO2023 dedicated to industry influence and the commercial determinants of health
- Ultimately, organising committees for scientific and health events should consider ending all sponsorship by corporations. Other organisations have adopted this policy. The World Congress of Public Health Nutrition, the World Breastfeeding Congress, and the Congress of the Latin American Society of Nutrition, to name a few examples, are all independently funded and have no presence of corporations

In the meantime, where there are activities sponsored by or involving corporations:

- There needs to be absolute transparency, early on when participants are registering for the event, about sessions and speakers from the industry
- All speakers must declare their conflicts of interest when making scientific presentations, and the badges of participants who attend the event on behalf of a company in the food, pharmaceutical or other industry should carry that information

It is time to remove corporate sponsorship and presence in scientific and healthcare events.

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