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Diageo, University College Dublin, and the Integrity of Alcohol Science: It's Time to Draw the Line Between Public Health and Public Relations

Babor, Thomas F

On April 6, 2006, Diageo Ireland, a subsidiary of Diageo PLC, the world's largest producer and distributor of alcoholic beverages, announced the awarding of a grant of 1.5 million euros to the University College Dublin's (UCD) Geary Institute. The grant will fund a three year study of health risk behavior in relation to hazardous drinking among young adults (ages 18-25) in Ireland. In the context of growing industry involvement in alcohol research, we question the propriety of this funding initiative and ask the administration of UCD to reconsider their decision to accept it.

According to the university's press release, the purpose of the research is "to identify the drivers of different patterns of alcohol use among this age group and the particular contexts and settings associated with these consumption patterns." The announcement notes that the research will provide useful information that, once published in scientific journals, can "inform policy decisions and specific intervention responses to reduce alcohol harm." Despite these lofty goals, there are a number of reasons why the direct funding of research by the alcoholic beverage industry is inadvisable at this time.

Current trends suggest increasing involvement of the alcohol industry in scientific research in ways that go beyond the technological, safety, and marketing aspects of their consumer products (1,2). Using terms like "corporate social responsibility" and "partnerships with the public health community," the industry (mainly large producers, trade associations and "social aspects" organizations) funds a variety of scientific activities such as meetings of investigators, research funding programs, and scientific publications. Because of the potential for conflict of interest, such activities may affect the objectivity of independent scientists and the credibility of scientific information. They also tend to shift the emphasis from effective public health policy to issues that are less threatening to the alcoholic beverage industry. Prior experience with the pharmaceutical, tobacco and other industries (3,4,5) demonstrates that this can happen when business interests are joined too closely with those of university-based scientists.

Another risk is the use of science and scientists by the alcohol industry for public relations purposes. In the case of the Geary Institute funding, Diageo's largesse seems to have less to do with the advancement of evidence-based alcohol policy than with the public image of the company itself. Whereas Diageo's press release on 6 April, 2006,

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stated that this project is part of a “range of initiatives supported by Diageo to promote responsible drinking and reduce alcohol harm in society,” the message given in a speech two days later to an industry group by the company’s global chief executive, Paul Walsh, was quite different. As reported in The Irish Times, “Mr Walsh said the issue was, for Diageo, a simple one. He said the company did not want problems with binge drinking to lead governments to place higher taxes on its products and thus eat into revenues. The UCD research funding is thus the perfect example of “enlightened self-interest,” particularly in light of the taxes placed on alcopops over recent years” (quoted from The Irish Times, April 8, 2006).

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The reference to taxes on alcopops in the context of this funding initiative is telling. Mr. Walsh’s words draw attention to the fact that for almost a decade some Diageo companies and parts of the alcohol industry have been engaged in a controversial set of marketing initiatives that involve the introduction of sweet flavored alcoholic beverages to young adults (6). These beverages are marketed and taxed in many countries as malt liquor (i.e., beer) products rather than distilled liquor, even though they carry names like Smirnoff Ice. Evidence that these alcoholic beverages are being consumed by underage drinkers, especially young girls, has resulted in efforts to increase taxes on alcopops in some countries (6,7). In 2006 the California Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control moved to classify and tax alcopops as distilled spirits, based on evidence that the production process involves the addition of distilled liquor rather than fermentation (6). Diageo filed legal briefs to oppose this change. Thus in Mr. Walsh’s comments about the funding of the Geary Institute project on the “drivers” of drinking in young people, he seems to be particularly conscious of the public relations problems and policy challenges (e.g., increased taxes on alcopops) facing his company.

Until recently, direct support of independent scientists provided by alcohol producers and industry-funded social aspects organizations has not been extensive, considering that the great majority of alcohol scientists and research centers throughout the world receive no research support from industry sources. Nevertheless, industry funding of university-based scientists has become a contentious issue at some universities because of the potential for conflict of interest in areas where public health is likely to be affected. Some universities, for example, have adopted policies to refuse funding from the tobacco industry (8,9).

It is interesting to note that the funding provided to the Geary Institute has apparently been given without peer review of the Institute’s research plan. And the principal investigators, Professors Colm Harmon and Patrick Wall, though competent and well respected in economic research, have virtually no direct experience with alcohol survey research. Moreover, the research program itself, with its emphasis on the development of more effective science based interventions, seems superfluous in light of recent

initiatives by the Health Promotion Unit within the Irish Ministry of Health and Children. The Unit has issued two comprehensive reports (10,11) that contain a total of one hundred policy recommendations. Those recommendations with the strongest scientific support (12,13) for effectiveness (e.g., increase alcohol taxes, lower legal blood alcohol level for impaired driving to .50 mg%) were opposed by the Drinks Industry Group of Ireland, of which Diageo's Guinness is a prominent member (see reference 10, Note I). The Health Promotion Unit has also conducted the first national survey of college drinking in Ireland as well as a study of the impact of alcohol advertising on teenagers. Findings from the latter study (14) suggest that alcohol advertising has a strong attraction for Irish teenagers owing to its portrayal of lifestyles and images that have little to do with the actual product advertised. When asked to rate their favorite ads, a sample of Irish boys and girls (ages 12-14) rated one Diageo brand (i.e., Guinness) as the most popular. Other findings of the study suggest violations in the industry's own self-regulation code, including portrayals of immoderate drinking, targeting young people, associating alcohol with social or sexual success, and using characters who appear close to or under the legal drinking age (11,14).

While we can sympathize with university administrators and research professors faced with increasing pressure to obtain independent grant support, we vigorously oppose the direct industry funding of individual investigators to conduct alcohol-related research, particularly policy-relevant studies. The idea of having parallel sets of policy recommendations, one from industry-supported academics and industry spokespersons, the other from independent scientists and health authorities, is disconcerting, in that such a situation is likely to create the same kind of confusion that delayed effective policies against smoking-related diseases for decades (15). Other scientific journals and research universities have come to similar conclusions (4,9,16,17). At best, the scientific activities supported by the alcoholic beverage industry provide financial support to a few social scientists and graduate students; at worst, the industry's scientific activities promote research projects that duplicate government sponsored studies, confuse public discussion of health issues and policy options, raise questions about the objectivity of research scientists, and provide a public relations advantage for the sponsoring organization when it seeks to impress regulatory bodies, discourage alcohol tax increases, or avoid advertising restrictions.

For these reasons we respectfully ask University College Dublin to reconsider its decision to accept direct industry funding for alcohol research if it cannot provide answers to the following questions:

The idea of having parallel sets of policy recommendations, one from industry-supported academics and industry spokespersons, the other from independent scientists and health authorities, is disconcerting, in that such a situation is likely to create the same kind of confusion that delayed effective policies against smoking-related diseases for decades.

- Why were the research protocols for this initiative not submitted for independent peer review?
- Has UCD investigated the corporate behavior of Diageo to determine whether they qualify as a "good corporate citizen"? Here we are not referring to Diageo's

funding of charitable activities or support of other research. Rather, we think it important that Diageo be scrutinized for marketing practices, product development, and advertising campaigns, particularly in relation to such product lines as Guinness, Smirnoff Ice and other flavored alcoholic beverages.

- Has UCD evaluated Diageo's support of numerous "social aspects/public relations" organizations whose activities have been opposed to evidence-based alcohol policy (18). For example, The Portman Group, supported in part by Diageo funds, has opposed evidence-based alcohol policies in the UK while serving as an advocate for ineffective alcohol policies (19). Another Diageo-funded organization, the International Center for Alcohol Policies, has been criticized for its public relations activities for the alcohol industry, its questionable use of alcohol research data, and its support of ineffective alcohol policies, such as alcohol education in developing countries (20,18,21).

Unless UCD can provide convincing answers to these questions, we respectfully ask that the senior administrators of the UCD notify Diageo that their gift is no longer welcome. If the research proposed by the Geary Institute has merit, we are certain that it will prove to be eligible for grant support from governmental or European Union funding agencies when evaluated through the normal peer review process. And if Diageo wants disinterestedly to support policy-relevant research, we suggest that they endorse Recommendation 59 of the Irish government's Strategic Task Force on Alcohol (2004) to establish an independent research and monitoring unit capable of extending knowledge and building capacity in alcohol research.

It has been argued (22) that sponsorship of research is vital to an industry's marketing strategies because it succeeds on a variety of levels: it helps to silence potential critics, creates the image of an industry composed of "responsible corporate citizens," influences public health policies and priorities, links their name to prestigious individuals and organizations, affects the direction and outcome of research, makes scientists dependent on industry funding, and creates public confusion about the real causes of a social problem. We do not think that UCD wants to diminish its well earned reputation for academic excellence by taking money for research that will inevitably raise suspicions as to its reliability and objectivity in the truly independent research sector. The real risk is that Diageo's gift will contribute less to science than to the image of an industry that seems far from enlightened in relation to effective alcohol policy.

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