

Legitimacy of think tanks

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Steve Harkins and Melissa Jones question the ability of the Stockholm Network to produce independent research since we receive funding from the pharmaceutical industry.

I entirely agree that funding sources for research carried out by policy-making organisations such as think tanks ought to be transparent wherever possible. We are funded by memberships and research grants from a range of companies, foundations and individuals. Not only do we not hide this, but we list all sponsors on our website and in our annual reports. In fact, most of the material cited by Harkins and Jones as evidence for our industry bias is provided by our own reports. This allows people to reach their own conclusions regarding our work, both in light of our funding, but most importantly from its substance. However Harkins and Jones's criticism is aimed purely at our (openly declared) funding, not at the substance of what we say - this is, after all, the easier target.

Allegations of lobbying are easy to make and essentially impossible to refute when unsubstantiated. This is why journals such as the BMJ now make declaration of competing interests an important part of publication. Harkins and Jones's Powerbase project has been set up by Spin Watch to be critical of think tanks, particularly those with a pro-market stance, and is funded by a number of foundations with an explicit anti-globalisation agenda. As such it is not surprising there may be an ideological opposition to what we have to say. I note that no information is given in the article as to the sources of their own funding.

As long as competing interests are declared, fair criticism of a think tank's work in a scientific journal such as the BMJ should be based on the merits of the research rather than simply on a political agenda which opposes the existence of think tanks in the first place.

Competing interests: I am responding to criticism of the organisation I run.

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