

## Letter to the Editor

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### Re: Out of the Box 'What's Wrong with Industry?'

Sir,

Debates around industry sponsorship of research and professional events have been discussed in various forums in this journal<sup>1,2</sup> and Geoffrey Cannon's recent Out of the Box query on 'What's Wrong with Industry?'<sup>3</sup> highlights the issue once again. Cannon challenges us to move beyond the rhetoric of 'industry is bad' by pointing out the complexity of various industry and state funding arrangements. His question 'why is industry not ok?' is a valid one and his examples elucidate some of the practical and ethical contradictions inherent in the debate. It seems however, that while noteworthy examples of sponsored events frequently appear in the arguments posed on both sides of the issue, rarely are examples of events that explicitly reject or prohibit sponsorship profiled. I'm not sure if this is because they do not exist or because there is a perception that they do not exist, so I offer a Canadian example, the Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health (OSNPPH), as a starting point. I hope that this will prompt other readers to share examples so that not only the ramifications of sponsorship, but also the impact of limiting it, can be considered in the debate.

The OSNPPH is the official organisation of Public Health Nutritionists and Registered Dietitians working in the Ontario Public Health System and is comprised of over 120 members from across the province. Ontario has a well-developed public health infrastructure and nutrition services are part of the programming mandated by the provincial government. OSNPPH is independent of both industry and government, although most of its members are considered to be local government employees. Its purpose is to give nutrition personnel in public health a strong voice to promote the importance of nutrition within public health and to comment on public health issues. The society advocates on both a provincial and federal level to advance the public health nutrition agenda ([www.OSNPPH.on.ca](http://www.OSNPPH.on.ca)).

Each year, the OSNPPH hosts a professional conference, called the Nutrition Exchange, for its membership and beyond. The event is characterised by the usual slate of guest speakers, facilitated workshops and resource displays and operates with no industry or government sponsorship support. Specifically, the decision not to solicit or accept corporate sponsorship of the Nutrition Exchange includes:

- Not using donations of money or food from food-related companies or marketing boards to sponsor speakers and/or nutrition breaks.
- Not accepting promotional items from food-related companies or marketing boards for display.
- Not distributing free food samples to OSNPPH members.
- Not providing gifts or door prizes donated by or purchased with funds donated by food-related companies or marketing boards.
- Not distributing or displaying educational resources from marketing boards.

The event lasts two days, is located in a different community each year to facilitate involvement from various parts of the province, and is housed in a comfortable and well-equipped setting away from the major costly conference centres. There are no industry exhibits, hand-outs, free bags, pens or other 'give-aways'. The focus of both the planners and the participants is on the content of the conference itself. Participants routinely evaluate the event as being highly worthwhile.

While this may not be a desirable option for all professional events, it does challenge the assumption that industry sponsorship is necessary to provide affordable and effective educational forums and it enhances the perceived ability of OSNPPH members to speak freely about the forces affecting the health of the populations they serve. The impact of this policy direction on public health efforts in Ontario deserves further analysis and warrants at least the same degree of consideration as the multitude of sponsorship examples, both positive and negative, that are routinely raised in the debate. I look forward to learning of other examples from the readership.

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### References

- 1 Nestle M. Food company sponsorship of nutrition research and professional activities: a conflict of interest? *Public Health Nutrition* 2001; **4**: 1015–22.
- 2 Margetts B, Arab L. Editorial: Sponsorship of research in public health nutrition. *Public Health Nutrition* 2001; **4**: 933.
- 3 Cannon G. Out of the Box. *Public Health Nutrition* 2007; **10**: 974–7.