

The normalization of conflicts of interest in the USA and their potential impact on public health nutrition

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Of the many criticisms surrounding the current Trump administration, one of the most unsettling is blatant conflicts of interest (CoIs). Numerous cases of the potential for profiteering by Trump officials and their families have sparked public outcry. These incidents include US government renting of Trump Tower space for an estimated US \$3M of taxpayer money per year (1), Donald Trump entertaining foreign dignitaries at his Mar-a-Lago resort (2), First Daughter Ivanka Trump receiving Chinese trademarks (3), Education Secretary Betsy DeVos retaining substantial investments in a company that produces Attention Deficit Disorder therapies for children (4), and Jared Kushner's sister flashing her ties in the White House to potential investors (5). While a cloud of secrecy remains over the names of many Trump deregulation appointees (we wonder why...), at least 28 of those identified have lobbied the agencies for which they now work, have former employers who will profit from deregulation, or stand to personally profit from deregulation (6). These and other routine CoIs emerging from the government is thus causing widespread international concern that CoIs will be normalized in the Trump era. Alarmed at this possibility, we here discuss how this kind of behavior can impact public health nutrition.

For the purposes of this paper, we define CoIs as a set of conditions in which professional judgment concerning a primary interest (public welfare, for example) is at risk of being influenced by a secondary interest such as financial profit.

American Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics

Even before the onset of the Trump era, the nutrition establishment in the US was rampant with CoIs. In 2015, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (AND; formerly the American Dietetic Association), which boasts the highest membership of food and nutrition professionals in the US, had fifteen corporations sponsoring its activities (7). These backers included the Coca-Cola Company, PepsiCo, Campbell Soup Company, UniLever, Kellogg Company and NatureMade – all transnational corporations which sell ultra-processed food-like products to consumers. AND is further sponsored by the Beverage Institute for Health & Wellness (an oxymoron if we've ever heard one!), an initiative of the Coca-Cola Company which produces and disseminates sugar-sweetened-beverage-friendly evidence on obesity.

Despite public criticisms, AND does not acknowledge these sponsorships as CoIs but claims they “help to advance the Academy's mission of empowering members to be the food and nutrition leaders”. The organization goes further to defend their corporate sponsorship scheme on their ‘Truth and Transparency Facts’ page by saying ‘the Academy's consumer messages are founded on evidence-based reviews of the latest and most authoritative science, including the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and other authoritative sources’ and are not influenced by corporate sponsors (8). But, as explained below, even these ‘authoritative sources’ are peppered with CoIs.

Dietary Guidelines for Americans

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans, the ‘evidence-based’ document which guides AND messages, reads a lot like tiptoeing around the truth to avoid insulting the food industry. The document certainly presents much ‘evidence’, but stops short of formulating actual guidelines. A striking example: “lower intakes of meats, including processed meats; processed poultry; sugar-sweetened foods, particularly beverages; and refined grains have often been identified as characteristics of healthy eating patterns” (9). This ‘authoritative’ and ‘evidence-based’ ‘guideline’ abruptly stops without taking a stance on limiting the consumption of foods that can damage the health of Americans. But why is this?

Several prominent public health nutritionists have commented on the impotency of these guidelines as a result of United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) influence, a branch of government whose main stakeholders are food producers and manufacturers. Walter Willet, chair of the Department of Nutrition and Harvard School of Public health and WPHNA member, said “the current system opens the guidelines up to lobbying and manipulation of data”. Marion Nestle, former chair of the Department of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at New York University and another WPHNA member, says of her experience working on past US dietary guidelines that she “was told we could never say ‘eat less meat’ because USDA would not allow it.” Because the Dietary Guidelines for Americans are subject to USDA input and approval, the health of Americans takes a back seat to USDA stakeholders and lobbyists with profits to lose.

US trade

Active promotion of breastfeeding is essential to public health and development. Breastfed babies are more likely to survive and less likely to suffer diarrhea and pneumonia—even in the USA (10-13). Later in life, breastfed babies are at lower risk of overweight, obesity and diabetes and score better on intelligence tests (14). In light of these benefits, the World Health Organization (WHO) advises exclusive breastfeeding up to 6 months of life, (15). Continued breastfeeding with complementary foods up to and beyond 2 years of age—or until the mother and child want to stop—is also commonly recommended.

In April 2017, the office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) released its latest National Trade Estimate examining the actions of US trading partners (16). This document identified policies that promote breastfeeding and restrict marketing of breastmilk substitutes in various countries (such as Hong Kong, Indonesia and Malaysia) as ‘significant trade barriers’ that should be eliminated. Thus, the routine US practice of ignoring CoIs can impact public health nutrition beyond its borders. One could go further in suggesting that the National Trade Estimate even constitutes a potential breach of Article 24 of the UN’s Convention on the Rights of the Child (17). Tellingly, the US is the only country in the world that has not ratified this convention.

Food Aid

Another case of US CoIs impacting the global community is its humanitarian aid in the form of food aid. Food aid is one of the key policy tools used by the international community to help alleviate hunger and suffering in the developing world and areas affected by natural or man-made disasters, and is a foundational pillar of establishing or maintaining population health in dire circumstances. Except for the US, donor countries provide the main UN agency involved, the World Food Programme (WFP) with money used to buy the cheapest, most locally-preferred commodities from a country close to where they are needed. In the

US, as in many other countries, agricultural price stabilization policy requires the government to purchase wheat and other agricultural commodities from farmers at a set price, causing the government to accumulate excess reserves in high production years. Much of the US surplus is then shipped to developing countries as food aid. While the recipient countries may benefit, it is done because it is good for US public relations (allowing the write off of surplus food to look like \$2.5 billion/year in foreign aid) (18). While in theory the US now avoids providing food aid in ways that harm local markets, sometimes these commodities do lower the price local farmers can receive for growing that food. An example, even in a disaster situation, is illustrated in the case of a Guatemalan earthquake--by the conservative Heritage Foundation (19).

Additionally, although the Food Aid Convention encourages that priority in food aid benefits be given to the recipients, it has often been observed that food aid is intrinsically political (20), implying large benefits for donors. For example, in US legislation on food aid, the development of export markets and reward to loyal allies are listed as objectives in addition to humanitarian concerns (21). Some commodities like wheat, cannot be grown well in tropical climates. Thus, giving it away for a period of time will accustom people to it, creating a demand which in the future will have to be met through imports.

In contrast, objectives of the EU in providing funds for food aid include promotion of food security, raising standards of nutrition, helping in emergencies and supporting self-sufficiency in food production. This however is not to say that conflict of interests is not present in the EU-funded food aid programs or that US policies ignore these loftier objectives. Regardless of the working mechanism, food aid should be allocated on the basis of recipient need to ensure population health and nutritional status in emergencies, not diplomatic, domestic farmer, or business interests.

Conclusion

Ignoring CoI may gradually weaken individuals' and institutions' ethical and moral values. In public health, a situation where a CoI arises may become dangerous in that it may cause population health to become a secondary priority to financial or other personal or institutional gain.

CoIs – tangible and perceived –must thus be avoided. When public health and nutrition are knowingly jeopardized in the name of financial gain, human rights are also infringed upon. Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognized the right of all humans to the “highest attainable standard of physical and mental health” (22). Again, the US is one of the few (six) countries that have not ratified this convention—preventing global consensus and the serious implementation of steps to hold countries accountable for infringing on these rights.

Thus, even before the blatantly visible Trump administration examples, CoIs have long been routinely allowed in government and civil life in the US. For a country touting itself as a beacon of democracy around the world, this can be called not only a crisis of leadership, but a crisis of the society as a whole. Sadly, instead of working to address this, thanks to the examples being set by its current administration, the population of the US is likely to accept CoIs as something increasingly “normal”. This is just business as usual in the country where

one president (Calvin Coolidge) declared that the “business of government is business.” Let us hope it remains an outlier in the international community.

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