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COMMENTARY

Researching Gambling: Have we learned nothing from Big Tobacco's overt manipulation of science?

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The global gambling industry was estimated to be worth US\$711.4 Billion in 2020, with projections of its worth to reach US\$876 Billion by 2026 (1). However, behind such headline grabbing statistics lies the reality of the extremely negative impacts gambling can have on physical, psychological and social functioning (2,3). Although estimates vary as to the level of gambling addiction in populations, evidence suggest that between 0.5–3.0% of the population are problem gamblers, with up to four times as many people reporting subclinical problems (4). An issue of particular concern is the significant growth of the online gambling industry during the COVID-19 pandemic (5).

Davies has recently examined gambling from a neuropsychological perspective, outlining the reinforcement prompts that perpetuate gambling (6,7). However, as well as looking at this individual level, it is also vital to look at how the industry works as a whole. A useful primer to understand the machinations of the gambling industry is to examine how Big Tobacco operates. Such a focus is appropriate in light of the strong history of the gambling and tobacco industries working together (8). Big Tobacco has been described as akin to the hydra of Greek mythology, wherein two heads sprout to replace each that is cut-off (9-10). This analogy is used to describe the industry's continuous attempts to circumvent and subvert health-oriented legislation designed to curtail and restrict their activities (11,12).

The global tobacco industry has a documented history of engaging in a wide

range of nefarious activities designed to undermine tobacco control, overcome negative health concerns, and promote their products (13). Their activities range what might be described as mild manipulation to outright and deliberate and blatant subversion of science and the law (13-16). For example, some of their less overt activities have included strategies such funding of the arts, health interventions, and numerous other ostensibly philanthropic interventions (13,14). In recent times they have also engaged in pseudo pro-environmental greenwashing, faking a pro-environment stance, to present the industry as socially aware, and thereby distract from other health issues (15-22). However, these activities are mild compared to other documented activities of Big Tobacco, which include openly lying to the US Congress, targeting minority groups, and deliberately subverting scientific investigations (13-15).

It is this last aspect of the activities of Big Tobacco that are of particular interest here. Tobacco industry documents have revealed how strategies evolved to deliberately undermine scientific studies highlighting the negative impact of first hand and later second hand smoking (23-29). Later, as pro-tobacco scientists routinely accepting Big Tobacco money became identified and discredited, the industry began funding scientists with whom they had no prior connection, to explore other potential causes that would obscure and muddy the relationship between tobacco and disease (13-15). Table One details six tobacco industry strategies to manipulate risk data identified by Bero (30).

Table One: Tobacco industry strategies to manipulate data on risk (30)

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|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Fund research that supports the interest group position.2. Publish research that supports the interest group position.3. Suppress research that does not support the interest group position.4. Criticize research that does not support the interest group position. |
|---|

5. Disseminate interest group data or interpretation of risk in the lay press.
6. Disseminate interest group data or interpretation of risk directly to policy makers.

Fiscal malfeasance in relation to gambling has an extremely long history in Ireland. The most infamous example is the Irish Hospital Sweepstakes which ran for over 50 years and was only wound up after dramatic evidence of deep rooted and longstanding corruption and collusion emerged (31,32). In more recent times evidence suggests that National Lottery Sports Lottery funding distributions demonstrate a clear bias towards areas represented by the Ministers for Arts, Sports and Tourism and the Ministers for Finance (33).

Attempts at manipulation by the gambling industry in Ireland are blatant, as evidenced by the recent attendance by Irish politicians at corporate hospitality tents funded by the Irish Bookmakers Association (IBA) at Punchestown race course (Co. Kildare, Ireland) . This rather transparent and obvious attempt to influence Irish politicians occurred when long- promised and overdue regulation of the gambling industry by the Oireachtas (Irish Parliament) is both overdue (34,35), and imminent (36,37).

It is vital that lessons are learned from the machinations of Big Tobacco when assessing how to respond to the growing power of, and damage caused by, the gambling industry. Funding should not be accepted from the gambling industry. Many journals and funders have taken a lead here, and now proscribe research and researchers funded by Big Tobacco (38). It is an issue of serious concern for example that a major recent report on the impact of gambling in Ireland was funded by the Gambling Awareness Trust (39). The Gambling Awareness Trust is ostensibly an independent charity '*set up to establish and operate a charitable fund which will fund gambling addiction counselling,*

prevention, education, research and awareness services in Ireland' (40). However, further examination of the Gambling Awareness Trust website reveals that it is funded by over 30 individual bookmakers (41; see Note 1). In future all researchers should decline funding from the gambling industry. If they do not, independence and integrity are at risk of erosion. If industries such as gambling and tobacco are allowed to fund research into their own activities, it stands to reason that the recipient of the funding is under an obligation to publish findings that they favour.

Finally, it is also important to note a fact that is seldom mention in any circles; the intrinsic role of organized crime in the gambling industry (42). The gambling industry is a routine avenue for money laundering (43,44), often including the washing of money gained through the production and sale of illicit narcotics (45). Therefore, research money which comes from this industry could potentially originate from organised crime.

In order to maintain their professional integrity researchers exploring the gambling industry and its impacts must avoid accepting funding from it, or its allies and affiliates. The lessons learned from the manipulative activities of Big Tobacco should be read as a template for tactics and strategies adopted by the gambling industry. To accept such funding in future is not just naïve, but a serious error of judgement that may be seen as collusion.

Notes

1. Funders listed in 2020 were: Bar One Racing; bet365; BETDAQ; betway; Boyle Sports; Bwin; Casumo; Celton; Chieftain

Bookmakers; Coral; Fox Bookmakers; Foxy Casino; Gala; Irish Greyhound Board; Ladbrokes; mintbet; Mr Green; Paddypower betfair; Party Casino; partypoker; Quinn Bet; redbet; Roncol Sports; SBOBet; Sean Graham; Sportingbet; SportPesa; The Stars Group; The Track; 32 Red; +o+e; Tully bookmakers; William Hill; Winners Enclosure; Winning Room.

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