



Clarification on Sponsorship of Health Professional and Scientific Meetings by Companies that Market Foods for Infants and Young Children

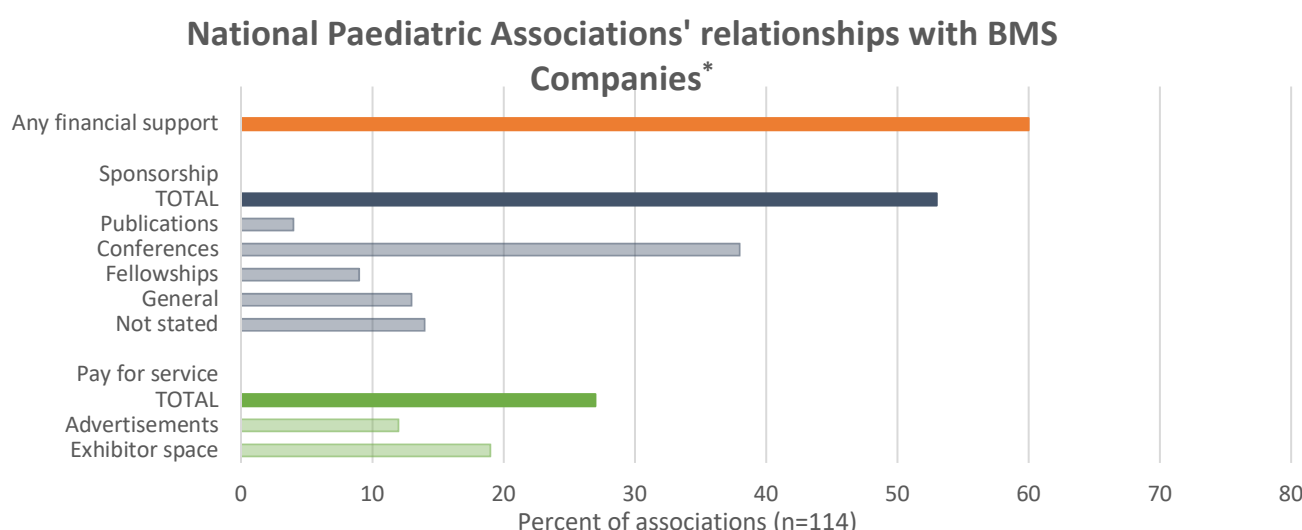
INFORMATION NOTE

Context

The Sixty-ninth World Health Assembly held in 2016 adopted resolution WHA 69.9 (1) in which it urged Member States and health professionals to implement the recommendations in the *WHO Guidance on Ending the Inappropriate Promotion of Foods for Infants and Young Children* (the Guidance) (2). The Guidance follows resolutions of the Forty-ninth and Fifty-eighth World Health Assemblies that urge Member States to ensure that financial support for infant and young child health programmes and workers do not create conflicts of interest (3,4). The Guidance recommends that “companies that market foods for infants and young children should not ... sponsor meetings of health professionals and scientific meetings and that health workers, health systems, and health professional associations should not allow [such sponsorship].” This Guidance notes that “health professionals and facilities are often targeted and influenced by the infant and young child food industry through promotion, relationships, and incentives and that these incentives create conflicts of interest and can result in the loss of independence, integrity and public credibility” (2).

Sponsorship is common among health professional colleges and associations. An examination of association websites found that over half of national paediatric associations reported receiving funding from manufacturers of breast-milk substitutes (BMS), usually for supporting conferences, which are meetings (Figure 1) (5). WHO and UNICEF have received queries from various associations regarding what is or is not considered to be corporate sponsorship of meetings of health professionals and scientific meetings by companies that market foods for infant and young children.

Figure 1: Prevalence and type of sponsorship from BMS companies amongst national paediatric association



*Source: Grummer-Strawn et al., BMJ Open, 2019

Purpose

The purpose of this information note is to provide guidance on how to identify sponsorship in the context of the 2016 Guidance on Ending Promotion of Foods for Infants and Young Children. The sponsorship activities described in this document are not exhaustive and they are not the only marketing activities that may establish conflicts of interest in health care systems and amongst health care professionals. These other types of marketing activities that may create conflicts of interest, including other types of sponsorship, are not discussed here.

Identifying inappropriate sponsorship

Companies that market any commercially produced food or beverage product (including complementary foods) that is specifically marketed as suitable for feeding infants and children from 6 months up to 36 months of age should not sponsor meetings of health professionals and scientific meetings and that health workers, health systems, and health professional associations should not accept or allow sponsorship from these companies. This includes companies that market any milk (or product that could be used to replace milk, such as fortified soy milk), whether in liquid or powdered form, that are specifically marketed for feeding infants and young children up to the age of 3 years including follow-up formula and growing-up milks ('formula milks'). It also includes companies that market other products in addition to foods or drinks, including formula milks for infants and young children up to 36 months.

Sponsorship (6-9) is a commercial transaction in which a financial or in-kind contribution made to a person, event, project, or activity is exchanged for commercial advantage.

Business and Marketing literature emphasises the commercial benefits of sponsorship to the sponsors. These include opportunities to generate goodwill for a brand among a group of people who can influence purchasing behaviour in others (10-12) and promote sales even in the absence of recognisable advertising and marketing.

Sponsorship is defined in business management as:

a business relationship between a provider of funds, resources or services and an individual, event or organization which offers in return some rights and associations that may be used for commercial advantage. Sponsorship allows a business to demonstrate its affiliation to the individual, event, or the organization that it has chosen to associate with. (13)

For the purpose of the Guidance, inappropriate sponsorship includes any form of contribution made with the aim, effect or likely effect of increasing recognition, recommendations, or appeal of commercial foods or drinks for infants and young children, including formula milks for children up to 36 months, or their consumption, either directly or indirectly. This definition, which captures not only the effect of commercial sponsorship activities but also its intent, is consistent with principles articulated in other

instruments of the World Health Organization and the World Health Assembly (14,15).

Meetings of health professionals and scientific meetings in this context include, but are not limited to, any meeting, conference, event, workshop, seminar or eLearning, for health professionals, scientists, or researchers, whether online or in-person.

Sponsorship establishes a visible, reciprocal relationship between a company and the organisation it sponsors. This may be perceived as implying that the company, or its product, has earned some endorsement or approval from the organisation it sponsors. When a company sponsors a meeting or conference, it borrows (or purchases) some of the reputational trust that researchers and health professionals place in the host organisation. Any sponsorship establishes a sense of reciprocal obligation between health professional associations and companies that market foods for infants and young children, including formula milks for children up to 36 months. This reciprocal obligation creates a conflict of interest for providers that may compromise patient care¹⁶. This effect is evident regardless of the size of the contribution or whether it involves in-kind or financial contributions. Direct, indirect or perceived conflicts of interest can all damage credibility and compromise patient care.

Health professionals are in a unique and powerful position to influence the infant feeding behaviours of caregivers and families responsible for young children because they are trusted to use their knowledge of medical and scientific evidence to recommend safe and effective infant feeding and care practices, nutritional and pharmaceutical products.

Health professionals exposed to targeted commercial activity have more positive attitudes to the products being marketed, are more likely to recommend their patients use these products, more likely to recommend patients use products in the category, and less likely to be able to identify false or misleading claims made in marketing materials. Furthermore, these effects occur even when health professionals cannot recall sponsors' names and when they believe they are not influenced by exposure to this sort of advertising (16-21).

Sponsorship of meetings of health professionals and scientific meetings is an activity that enables sponsoring companies, including those that promote

foods and drinks for infants and young children, to disguise promotional activities and marketing materials as educational activities or scientific content that is, explicitly or implicitly, endorsed by the host organisation (16-19).

Sponsorship activities

The WHO Guidance indicates that companies that market foods or beverages for infants and young children, including formula milks for children up to 36 months of age, should not sponsor meetings of health professionals or scientific meetings, regardless of any other product that company also markets. It also places an obligation on health professional associations to refuse to accept sponsorship, in any form, from companies that market foods for infants and young children, including formula milks for children up to 36 months, or from any foundation, association or other body that represents such a company.

In addition to providing funds to support the general operation of a meeting, conference or educational event, the activities listed below are also examples of sponsorship.

Provision of in-kind support for specific activities of a conference.

This includes, but is not limited to, providing a meal, refreshments or catering during or between sessions, offering child-care or other services to delegates or speakers, providing recreational activities or spaces for use during a conference or meeting. It also includes providing gifts or merchandise for distribution to delegates, regardless of whether these gifts bear any mark, including trademarks, whether registered or not, known to be associated with a company or product.

Advertisements of any company, brand, or product.

This includes, but is not limited to, advertisements or other promotional material placed in any part of a program booklet, associated research publications including journal supplements or special issues, delegates' attendance packs (whether physical or digital), on seats, lecterns, floors, walls, ceilings, projection screens or other surfaces.

Sponsorship of sessions or side-sessions.

Support that is limited to specific sessions or side events is also considered sponsorship. While meeting organisers cannot prevent companies from holding their own independent meetings, they should not permit any type of promotion or cross promotion of foods for infants and young children, including formula milks for children up to 36 months and brands associated with these products, or any announcements about concurrent or adjacent events organised, funded, or hosted by a company that produces or markets foods for infants and young children, or any foundation, association or other body that represents such a company.

Financial support or aid, scholarships, awards, or grants.

Financial support, including but not limited to, travel awards, registration support, accommodation subsidies, or grants provided by companies that market foods for infants and young children for distribution to delegates or speakers for the purpose of attending the meeting is a form of sponsorship. Coordinating with event organizers to provide funds directly to delegates or speakers is another form of sponsorship. Providing financial support directly to a delegate or speaker is clearly addressed in WHO guidance (1) and needs no further explication. It should not be permitted.

Sale of meeting delegates' contact details.

Providing registration lists to companies is a form of sponsorship that facilitates direct marketing to delegates in return for providing financial support for the conference.

Exhibition space

Selling or hiring exhibition space is a form of sponsorship. Although the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes (22) allows companies to provide health workers with information on their products, provided it is restricted to scientific and factual matters, sponsored exhibits are promotional in nature. This form of sponsorship should not be permitted.

Summary

The *WHO Guidance on Ending the Inappropriate Promotion of Foods for Infants and Young Children* calls on governments to end sponsorship of meetings of health professionals and scientific meetings by companies that market foods for infants and young children, including formula milks for children up to 36 months. Therefore, companies that market these products should not be allowed to sponsor health professional or scientific meetings or events, regardless of what other products that company may also market. Professional and scientific associations or organisations who organise or host these events (including their representatives) should neither solicit nor accept sponsorship from companies that market foods for infants and children, including formula milks for children up to 36 months

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