

LOBBY WATCH David Miller, Marisa De Andrade

The Social Issues Research Centre

SIRC produces guidelines for journalists on the reporting of science and health issues, but is it as independent as it is perceived to be?

The Social Issues Research Centre (SIRC) is an “independent, non-profit organisation” that says it carries out “balanced, calm and thoughtful” research on lifestyle issues such as drinking, diet, and pharmaceuticals (www.sirc.org). However, it may be perceived that the organisation acts more like a public relations agency for the corporations that fund its activities. These include Diageo, Flora, Coca-Cola, GlaxoSmithKline, and Roche, among others. Although SIRC does publish this partial list of funders, it is not immediately apparent which company has sponsored which study. And in some instances this information is not included in media reports.

SIRC has produced guidelines for journalists on the reporting of science and health issues, but the guidelines include little on transparency or avoiding conflicts of interest. SIRC is not always transparent about its own funding. For example, it was commissioned by HRT Aware to produce a report that concluded that “well-informed women” taking hormone replacement therapy are “benefiting” and feeling happier, healthier, and sexier. The research received widespread coverage in the broadsheet, tabloid, and broadcast media. Neither the press nor SIRC mentioned that HRT Aware was funded by drug companies, including Janssen-Cilag, Wyeth, Solvay, Servier, Organon, and Novo Nordisk. SIRC mentioned, on the back cover of the report, only that HRT Aware was “industry supported.”

SIRC’s science reporting guidelines focus on the exaggeration of risk by the media but

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have little to say about risks that may be underplayed by the media. SIRC is sceptical that there is such a thing as an obesity “epidemic,” which may fit well with the interests of funders such as Coca-Cola, Cadbury Schweppes, Masterfoods, and the Sugar Bureau. It has coined the term “riskfactorphobia” to suggest that we are too averse to risk, which fits the interests of the food companies as well as the raft of alcohol firms for which SIRC works. None of the reports mentioned in the foregoing paragraph contain information about the source of funding, so it is

difficult to tell how “clients” feed into particular activities.

In some cases SIRC does say which corporation has sponsored its reports. Ebay funded a report on the “ebay generation”; Tio Pepe, a drinks company, funded one on dinner parties; the Prudential, an insurance company, one on risk; and pub chain owner Greene King on “the local.”

Although SIRC’s publicity material regularly uses the term “social scientists” to refer to its own staff, it uses the same personnel and office as a commercial market research company, MCM Research. SIRC’s codirectors, Peter Marsh and Kate Fox, work for both organisations. The MCM website used to ask: “Do your PR initiatives sometimes look too much like PR initiatives? MCM conducts social/psychological research on the positive aspects of your business. The results do not read like PR literature, or like market research data. Our reports are credible, interesting and entertaining in their own right. This is why they capture the imagination of the media and your customers.”

Recently, however, MCM has taken a lower profile. Its website now redirects to the SIRC one, and visitors are informed that the centre “has now taken over the task of hosting and publishing reports and materials conducted under the MCM Research name.”

Still, SIRC is taken seriously by some in government. It was recently commissioned to produce two independent reviews for an investigation by the Department for Children, Schools and Families of the commercialisation of childhood. The reports, published in late 2009, oppose a public health approach that is based on population level measures, including the restriction of advertising or marketing. The conclusion that SIRC reached is that “the issues involved are very much more complex”—a position consistent with that advanced by elements of the food and advertising industries.

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References are on bmj.com

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PETER MCARDMID/GETTY

BMJ.COM POLL RESULTS

Homoeopathy on the NHS

A recent poll on bmj.com asked: “Should homoeopathy be available on the NHS?” The question generated an unprecedented number of responses, in excess of 10 000; and 79% of respondents voted “No.” Unusually, more than 50 respondents left a comment, and some of their thoughts make interesting reading.

“It won’t save the NHS any real money if homoeopathy is banished from the NHS, for an important role of homoeopathy in the NHS is to render treatment-satisfaction to subgroups of patients who have exhausted all the conventional options. Who’s going to take these patients then? Will the alternative to NHS homoeopathy be cheaper?” asks correspondent Sam.

William House thinks homoeopathy should continue to be available on the NHS, for numerous reasons. He concludes: “We are undergoing a shift of power away from large institutions and corporations and towards the public and must listen to the public on this issue. Congratulations to government for doing so.”

Worm says: “Homoeopathy doesn’t work. Every single high-quality study shows this. The NHS should not be in the business of allocating valuable resources to pseudo-scientific wishful thinking. Go away, do some proper research, show effectiveness and then start asking the NHS to fund it.”

And Barry Desbrough suggests a fully integrated solution: “Placebo medication is OK, as long as it is not used in place of effective medication. It should be a heck of a lot cheaper though. Can’t the NHS make its own sugar pills and little bottles of water?”

The poll is now closed, but you can still participate in a discussion about homoeopathic remedies on doc2doc, the BMJ Group’s clinical community, at <http://tinyurl.com/yjb9esr>.

Also on doc2doc, the question “Would you change career after medical school?” (with accompanying poll) has sparked a lively discussion. Opinions range from “I’m eight years into this career now and am not likely to back down without a fight” (Merys Jones) to “I really do believe medicine is worth leaving only if there’s something you’d much rather do” (DC).

● Have your say at <http://tinyurl.com/ygfw4ne>

