

HEALTH

The NIH's Cozy Relationship With Big Alcohol Is Bad for Science



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The NIH's alcohol research arm is being accused of serious ethical lapses in its relationship with the industry. Image: jarmoluk (Pixabay)

The National Institutes of Health is facing more allegations that it's in Big Alcohol's corner. Not only has the agency been accused of begging the alcohol industry for money—using a sales pitch that implied their results would likely be favorable to the industry, according to a March report from the *New York*

Times—but, according to a new article from STAT, some scientists are now claiming that the NIH has run interference on and shut down research into the relationship between advertising and underage alcohol consumption.

The claims, if true, would both undermine an ongoing, government-led trial trying to find out whether moderate alcohol can be healthy for us, and the NIH's pledged mission to promote and fund impartial, important research.

Last year, scientists across the world began recruiting adults over the age of 50 to take part in the study. These volunteers have been randomly assigned to either become moderate drinkers (defined as having one daily drink of their choice) or to abstain completely. Over the next six years, they plan to see which group ends up having more heart attacks, strokes, and deaths. It's expected that nearly 8,000 adults will ultimately take part in the study.

Though the \$100 million trial is ostensibly NIH-funded, around two-thirds of this money has indirectly come from donations made by five of the largest alcohol companies in the world, including Heineken and Anheuser-Busch InBev (The donations were made to a foundation set up by the NIH to raise private funding). And an investigation by the *New York Times* last March found that scientists and officials from the NIH's National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism allegedly tried to solicit these donations from industry representatives several times throughout 2013 and 2014 for their planned trial.

Outside scientists involved with the study were allegedly paid by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), part of the NIH, to travel to conventions and give presentations that suggested their eventual findings could vindicate the industry by proving the benefits of moderate drinking. One former

NIAAA official told the *NYT* that she reached out to alcohol industry executives after these talks, pleading for their support.

The NIH's long-running director, Francis Collins, has stood behind the value and scientific integrity of the study itself, but said in a statement to reporters that he was "concerned" about the officials' and scientists' reported behavior. Soon after the *NYT* story broke, he announced that the agency would investigate whether employees have violated policies that prohibit them from asking for outside donations.

But the NIH's alcohol ties seem to run even longer than this large study. On Monday, STAT first reported, other scientists alleged they've had their NIH-funded research dismissed and their further funding yanked because it was critical of the alcohol industry.

Michael Siegel, a physician and epidemiologist at Boston University, told STAT that he and his colleague, David Jernigan of Johns Hopkins University, were invited to the NIAAA headquarters in Maryland in 2015 to discuss their research. As they presented their work, which suggested that alcohol marketing in TV shows could influence underage drinking, the current head of the NIAAA, George Koob, allegedly yelled that he didn't "fucking care!" about alcohol advertising.

Six months prior to the meeting, in 2014, Koob similarly disparaged the sort of research Siegel and Jernigan had been working on. In an alleged email correspondence STAT obtained between Koob and Samir Zakhari, a retired NIAAA official who became the senior vice president for science at the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, Koob promised that studies related to

alcohol advertising would no longer be funded under his watch. Koob had been appointed head of the NIAAA earlier that year.

Zakhair allegedly replied, “Thanks, George. I am 100 percent sure that you will spend research money on real science.”

The Distilled Spirits Council would later dispute Siegel and Jernigan’s published findings. And Jernigan’s later application to receive NIH funding for a pilot study that would look further at the connection between underage drinking and advertising using social media was also rejected by a council chaired by Koob, despite it having gotten a high rating from the first round of reviews.

Koob told STAT that his criticisms were based on legitimate scientific objections. He has also defended the NIAAA’s record, noting that the agency has funded “a vast amount of research on underage drinking, which is among the Institute’s top research priorities.”


But to those like Nicholas Evans, a medical ethicist at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, both these incidents suggest a deep rot within the NIAAA.

“This has the general contours of a scandal on the scale of something like the tobacco industry’s funding of scientific research that called into question the relationship between smoking and lung cancers,” he told Gizmodo via email. “Here, we have a direct relationship between key decision-makers in federal funding agencies—the people on whose word scientist’s projects live or die—in very close, very compromised relationships with industry representatives.”

Evans was particularly struck by the email exchange between Zakhair and Koob, when Zakhair alluded to Siegel and Jernigan’s work as not real science.

“This is the kind of language we’d expect from a tobacco company about lung cancer, or an oil company about research into anthropogenic climate change. Making broad, sweeping claims about what is or is not ‘real’ science—especially when that science has been subject to multiple rounds of peer review—is the province of propagandists, not scientists,” he said.

“If anything, the fact that the alcohol lobby doesn’t want a particular kind of research to go forward should be a strong reason *to fund it immediately*,” Evans added.

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Evans also said that Zakhair's lateral move from the NIAAA to the alcohol lobby is similarly indicative of a too-cozy relationship between health agencies, scientists, and the private sector. Indeed, it's a long-standing problem that's only gotten bigger in the era of Trump.

"For Zakhari to be able to retire from NIAAA, then work for a lobby group whose bottom line is directly affected by results produced by NIAAA-funded research, and be that group's liaison to his former employer presents a stunning conflict of interest," Evans said. "The revolving door from federal agencies to lobby groups is bad for science and bad for society."

And while the trial might very well go off without any ethical hitches (it wouldn't be the first study to show moderate drinking can be good for us), Evans says it wouldn't validate the NIH's and other agencies' dependence on industry cash.

"Ultimately, federal agencies—not just the NIAAA, but NIH leadership generally—should be standing up to industry," he said. "A \$100 million study sounds huge, but NIAAA's total budget is almost \$500 million. NIH's budget is \$32 billion: the alcohol industry's contribution is pocket change on that."

"If NIH can't stand up to the alcohol lobby, no one can," Evans added.

The NIAAA has not immediately responded to a request for comment about the veracity of the email correspondence obtained by STAT, nor whether it plans to investigate Koob's relationship to the alcohol industry. Aside from the internal NIH investigation, Collins said that he plans to have a panel of outside experts once again review the ongoing moderate drinking trial's methodology and design.