

Was An Alcohol Advertising Study Nixed In Exchange For Big Alcohol Funding?

By [Kelly Burch](#) 04/05/18

An email exchange between the head of the NIAAA and an alcohol lobbyist suggests a deeper connection between the organizations.

The director of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) appears to have promised alcohol industry leaders that he would not support or fund research that harmed the industry, including a study into how alcohol advertising can affect underage drinking rates, according to recently-released emails reported by [STAT News](#).

NIAAA director George Koob assured the leadership of an alcohol industry trade group in 2014 that similar research would not be published, after papers related to the study on the effects of advertising on underage alcohol consumption were published in respected journals.

“Sam: For the record. This will NOT happen again,” Koob wrote to Samir Zakhari, senior vice president for science at the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, the lobbying group for alcoholic beverage producers.

Koob went on to explain to Zakhari why the project was financed by the NIH, which is supposed to base funding decisions on scientific merit and public health needs.

“It was funded over three years ago under a PA [project announcement] that does not exist anymore,” according to a copy of the email obtained through a



public records request. The email ended, “I will NOT be funding this kind of work under my tenure. Best wishes george.”

Koob’s seemingly biased approach to research wasn’t limited to email. *STAT* reported that after a 2015 meeting with Dr. Michael Siegel of Boston University, leader of the research on the connection between advertising and underage drinking rates, Koob jumped from his chair and yelled at the scientists, even saying “I don’t f***ing care!”

Siegel said he was confused by the interaction, until a *New York Times* report revealed last month that the NIH turned to the liquor industry to fund millions of dollars of research into the health benefits of moderate drinking.

“Things finally made sense,” Siegel said. “If they’re soliciting money from industry, they wouldn’t want to do anything that would affect their chance of getting that money. Of course that will bias them toward intimidating researchers who study things [the industry doesn’t] like.”

Siegel’s colleague, David Jernigan of Johns Hopkins University, was later denied funding for further research, despite the fact that his proposal received positive reviews from other scientists.

Koob told *STAT* that his email to Zakhari was not meant to guarantee protection for the industry, but rather “to convey that I had no intention of supporting research that was not of the highest scientific quality.”

Koob also rejected the idea that he was only funding research that the alcohol industry would approve of.

“NIAAA funds a vast amount of research on underage drinking, which is among the Institute’s top research priorities,” he said.