

CORRESPONDENCE

Who Is Really the Source of Alcohol Policy Information: The Example of a Social Aspects and Public Relations Organization in Brazil

Dear Editor:

The Information Center on Health and Alcohol, known as CISA in Portuguese, is a social aspects and public relations organization funded by the alcohol industry that is located in São Paulo, Brazil. Since 2005, AMBEV—part of the AB In-Bev group, the largest alcohol industry worldwide—sponsors CISA as a component of its corporate social responsibility activities (Pinsky & Laranjeira, 2008). Currently, the transnational corporation Heineken, AMBEV's main competitor, also funds CISA (Centro de Informações sobre Saúde e Álcool, 2020). Aside from the alcohol industry, there is no other source of funding that is disclosed on the organization's website or in documents made available to the public. Nevertheless, CISA describes itself as an independent, public interest nongovernmental organization (NGO) and has partnerships with both universities and medical organizations. According to their press agency, which also serves AMBEV, the organization serves as the main source of information about alcohol-related topics for the Brazilian public and media (Planin, 2020).

Savell et al. (2016) described a number of “information strategies,” which are tactics used by the alcohol industry to influence and shape alcohol policy regulations, including the development of relationships with policymakers and the commission, writing, and dissemination of research, technical reports, books, and other publications. These tactics typically generate literature that lacks scientific rigor, resulting in imprecise information regarding alcohol but which will then contribute to shaping social norms in a manner that is more favorable to the alcohol industry's interests (Lim et al., 2019). CISA is currently active in the distribution of their own non-peer-reviewed publications, using unclear methodology to analyze public data from the national health information system, revising scientific literature, and replicating data from national surveys to support select recommendations and guidelines from the World Health Organization (WHO).

A 151-page report published in 2020, “Alcohol and Health for Brazilians: Panorama 2020” (Andrade, 2020), exemplifies the subtle misinformation disseminated by groups related to the alcohol industry. The document pays

very little attention to the importance of the WHO's best buys of alcohol control (i.e., limiting physical availability, restricting advertising and marketing, and increasing the cost through taxation; Monteiro, 2020). In addition, industry self-regulation is cited as an example of effective policy that is already in place in Brazil, despite the strong evidence to the contrary (Noel et al., 2017). But more importantly, there is no disclosure of CISA's conflict of interest with regard to the alcohol industry. In contrast, the WHO is quoted more than 120 times throughout the document, which suggests a close alignment with the WHO's objectives. The report includes a statement indicating that the WHO encourages the alcohol economic sector to contribute to the reduction of the harmful use of alcohol (p. 34, Andrade, 2020). Although there is no currently agreed upon measure with regard to the concentration of alcohol contained in a standard drink in Brazil, the report defines it as falling within the higher end of the range worldwide (14 g of pure ethanol), which is then accompanied by quotes pertaining to the beneficial effects of alcohol use (pp. 13, 26, 27, Andrade, 2020).

A further indication of a conflict of interest is evident in the makeup of CISA's executive board, which consists of both professors and health researchers from Brazilian universities and alcohol industry representatives. In fact, CISA's founder and president is a professor in a medical school and the current coordinator of the municipal drug program for the city of São Paulo that is responsible for the local government's decisions regarding drug policies, prevention, and treatment. Concurrently, he is a member of the pilot initiative steering committee in Brasilia, an AB InBev program, that uses six cities across the world “as laboratories for testing a package of programs, policies, and practices” aiming to reduce harmful drinking (AB InBev, 2020).

A recent example of this clear-cut conflict has been observed during the COVID-19 pandemic in which the media regularly consults CISA's members—probably a result of significant resources spent on press releases by the organization—about the likely impact that social isolation may be having on alcohol consumption (Guerra, 2020; Sampaio, 2020). During these interviews, the source of CISA's funding is never disclosed, nor are the aggressive efforts of the

alcohol industry to raise alcohol sales during this period through massive investment in e-commerce platforms as well as the sponsorship of social media live videos with popular Brazilian celebrities.

These are just some of the consequences of CISA's failure to disclose conflict of interest that parallels other alcohol industry front groups, which is an issue that is concerning from both a scientific and policymaking perspective (Tangcharoensathien et al., 2019). Awareness of the various ways conflict of interest manifests and the negative consequences (e.g., shaping alcohol policies) is often limited to academia and a few other sectors of civil society (e.g., NGOs that oppose unhealthy commodities). Unfortunately, it is not customary in many countries, including in Brazil, to be required to disclose conflicts of interest in conjunction with the release of data and findings in the media. As a result, the general population, legislators, and other stakeholders are ordinarily unaware when analysts or institutions are affiliated with the alcohol industry. There is no valid justification for a partnership between the public health community and unhealthy commodity industries, such as the alcohol industry, particularly when those partnerships are not clearly disclosed. Progress has been made in the tobacco field, but the alcohol industry still relies on these omissions and failures to disclose, at the risk of the global public health community (Marten et al., 2020). The alcohol industry in Brazil continues to infiltrate and have access to the government and research in a way that is problematic and needs to be monitored and curtailed.

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