Position on conflict of interest management of the Latin American Society of Nutrition (SLAN)*

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Abstract
There is solid evidence documenting relationships between the food and beverage industry and academia that shows that industry sponsored research is likely to bias results in favor of industry. In Latin America, examples of these situations have been documented in Mexico, Brazil, Chile, Peru, Colombia, and Ecuador, among others. Due to the urgent need for studying and managing relationships between the food and beverage industry and the field of health and nutrition research, in 2017, the President of the Latin American Society of Nutrition (SLAN) appointed a Conflict of Interest Committee (CCI). The CCI was charged with the development of a proposal of a position for the management of conflict of interest (COI) for consideration by SLAN. This document details the work of CCI, and the position adopted by SLAN.

Keywords: conflict of interest; ethics committees; nutrition policy; food industry

Resumen
Existe evidencia sólida de la existencia de relaciones entre la industria de alimentos y bebidas y la academia. Ésta sugiere que la investigación patrocinada por la industria es susceptible de conferir sesgos a su favor en los resultados. En América Latina, se han documentado ejemplos de estas situaciones en México, Brasil, Chile, Perú, Colombia y Ecuador, entre otros. Ante la necesidad urgente de estudiar y gestionar las relaciones entre la industria de alimentos y bebidas y el campo de investigación en salud y nutrición, en 2017 el Presidente de la Sociedad Latinoamericana de Nutrición (SLAN) designó a un Comité de Conflicto de Intereses (CCI). El CCI tuvo la encomienda de hacer una propuesta de postura sobre manejo de conflicto de intereses (CDI) de la SLAN. El presente artículo refleja los trabajos del CCI y la postura que adoptó la SLAN.

Palabras clave: conflicto de intereses; comités de ética; políticas de nutrición; industria de alimentos

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Received on: April 11, 2018 • Accepted on: August 29, 2018

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Given the urgent need to study and manage relationships between the food and beverage industry and academia, the President of the Latin American Society of Nutrition (SLAN) appointed, for the first time in the history of SLAN, a Conflict of Interest Committee (CIC) in 2017. It was commissioned to analyze the relevant academic literature on the subject, review the forms of identification and management of conflict of interest (COI) that other professional and international organizations have implemented, and make a position proposal on COI management of the SLAN. The composition of the Committee is as follows: Simón Barquera (president), Gabriela García (secretary), Karina Sánchez Bazán (advisor), Hala Boukerdenna (observer), Deborah Navarro (member), Ricardo Uauy (member), Rafael Pérez-Escamilla (member), Reynaldo Martorell (member), Manuel Ramírez (member). The present paper reflects the works of the mentioned Committee and the position adopted by SLAN, it was reviewed, modified and approved by the Board of Directors 2015-2018.

Background

Conflict of interest in the field of health research is a phenomenon that has been well documented for decades, particularly in the tobacco and pharmaceutical industries. In the sphere of nutrition it has been well described, for example, the promotional actions of producers and marketers of breast milk substitutes which seek to generalize their use at the expense of infants’ health.

In the last decades, important lifestyle changes have taken place, as well as changes in the global food system, which are even more pronounced in Latin America, having profound implications for the population’s health. Society has transformed its environment, which is now predominantly urban and sedentary, and through this the eating patterns have also been modified. As part of this problem, diverse researchers have identified significant increases in the consumption of foods that contain high amounts of sugars, sodium, saturated fats and trans fats, such as sugary drinks and ultra-processed foods.

National efforts to reduce consumption of unhealthy foods, regulate information on these foods and reformulate their content have frequently found opposition from the industry that produces and markets them. Among the strategies used by this industry we find: Promotion of relationships with nutrition professionals and their organizations and institutions; providing support and sponsorship for academic events; providing research funds ordinations for infrastructure and academic training; attending congresses, meetings, and even participating in social events. This phenomenon affects the entire health sector, including its organizations and institutions. With these activities, the industry achieves commercial benefits. This, in turn, displaces the primary interest of those with whom they interact, which is to improve health.

There is solid evidence that research sponsored by the industry is susceptible to bias that favors the industry. This phenomenon has made it indispensable for researchers to clearly communicate their relationships with industry, so it taken into account when preparing similar investigations, as well as controlled in summaries of the literature, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses. A recently published scientific report has caused great concern by showing how the sugar industry biased research on cardiovascular disease in the U.S, as well as the recommendations and dietary guidelines; this was done by sponsoring researchers who never declared their COI. For this reason, any industry-sponsored research should be treated with ethics and transparency. Nowadays, it has become a common practice to corroborate research findings with studies that are free from commercial influences.

Relationships between the food industry and professional groups are common. It wasn’t until relatively recently, due to national efforts to decrease chronic diseases, that these relationships became noticeable and problematic, for the academic sector as well as for those in charge of designing health and nutrition policies. These relationships have an important potential to affect decision-making and positions taken by professionals with respect to the products marketed by the industry. Examples of these situations have been documented in Latin American countries such as: Mexico, Brazil, Chile, Peru, Colombia, and Ecuador.

Concerned about this problem, and particularly, about cases of inappropriate influence of industry on the development of academic nutrition events — such as the International Congress of the Latin American Society of Nutrition (SLAN, Spanish acronym) — a group of researchers and nutrition professionals, who are members of SLAN, sent a petition to the current president of this society, in November, 2015. The petition calls for urgent measures to recognize, handle and prevent conflicts of interest. These measures must allow the research agenda and priority themes discussed in SLAN events to be generated based on discussions between professionals, as well as the financing of projects and actions to be regulated, in order to avoid the influence of groups with interests that are different from the objectives of the society.

In accordance with the instructions from SLAN’s president, a commission was formed to propose a code
of COI, which would allow for transparent relationships of SLAN, as well as of its members, with the industries producing food and beverages, nutraceuticals, and medicines, who often sponsor diverse meetings and events with commercial interests. The objectives of this code are:

- To establish norms and principles that will regulate internal and external relationships between SLAN and the food, pharmaceutical, tobacco and alcohol industries, as well as its participation in academic events and sponsoring to carry out symposia, congresses and other scientific activities.
- To make relationships transparent between SLAN members and their institutions, and the industry, including its participation in academic works and positions.

SLAN will promote dissemination of these guidelines and recommendations at each meeting, so that they are well known and used by local societies, seeking to maintain a Latin American research agenda that is motivated by priority health problems and not influenced by commercial interests.

The result of this task is a first approach that must be approved and periodically updated by society members. We expect this proposal to contribute to building a culture in which COI will be prevented and, when this is not possible, that they will be declared and managed. This code must promote adoption of these practices at a local level by SLAN members, its institutions and organizations. With this, we expect to provide a satisfactory response to its members’ demand for a Latin American Society of Nutrition that is committed to research as a vehicle to improve the population’s health.

**SLAN’s position**

The SLAN is a non-profit entity, formed by researchers and professionals in nutrition. SLAN’s goal is to improve the population’s health through the generation of knowledge and its application in the field of food and nutrition in Latin America and the Caribbean. In the process of generating knowledge, the society considers it a fundamental duty to protect the principles of objective research with a mission, as well as the ideas, for the benefit of society. This includes transparency on the origin of the information, as well as the management of resources that will be allocated to this activity.

SLAN acknowledges that health professionals and the organizations where they work and/or participate, have relationships with external entities, which could represent interests that are in conflict or compete with the principles of SLAN. For this reason, we need to guarantee that the activities, positions and studies that are proposed, analyzed or discussed, are carried out with standards of complete integrity, transparency and ethical conduct.

The U.S. Institutes of Medicine identify COI as diverse circumstances which increase the risk of judgement or actions, with respect to a fundamental professional interest, and are improperly influenced by a secondary interest. It is important to point out that COI is not a synonym of corruption, but serve as a gateway to it. COI have great relevance in the food, nutrition, and health areas, even more than in other disciplines, due to the powerful economic interests and the impact these may have on health decisions and the welfare of populations. We need to emphasize that the basic purpose of these companies is to generate profits and not the promotion of public health, even if they may claim otherwise in their discourse.

The association of industry with research groups, societies, and institutions of the health sector, provides it with legitimacy and credibility; it also allows it to gain the loyalty of health professionals, who act as leaders in public opinion. Although COI is not synonymous with scientific fraud, nor malpractice in research, there is enough evidence to consider it an important source of bias, in research, as well as in professional work.

The standard way to deal with COI is to prevent and avoid it; if that is not possible, it must be managed by the institutions, in this case, by SLAN. Among the strategies used to achieve this are the dissemination of the COI code and its guidelines, to guarantee that members are informed of the problems and of the SLAN rules to this respect. Thus, the interests of actors involved in any action, position or study must be made public.

SLAN’s position on the COI problem is summarized in the following 12 basic guidelines, which seek to prevent it and establish mechanisms to manage it.

The Latin American Society of Nutrition will:

1. Promote, through its members, chapters and societies, these guidelines, and will encourage their adoption at all levels. It will also promote a culture of knowledge and awareness with respect to COI in nutrition and health.
2. Avoid sponsorships, donations and/or monetary or in kind support from groups, brands, institutions, or persons with commercial interests, when the Board of Directors considers these not to be indispensable for carrying out its main functions and activities.
3. Submit the sponsorships, donations and/or monetary or in kind support given by companies producing foods and beverages for revision to the Conflict of Interest Committee (CIC) so they can be approved and ratified by the Board of Directors in order to avoid the products whose habitual consumption generates health risks, according to what has been established by the WHO \(^{27}\) and PAHO. \(^{28}\)

4. Guarantee that all financial support that is accepted will be publicly disclosed.

5. Consider in its revision process, business practices, in order to avoid the sponsorship of companies that have opposed national efforts to improve the food system, including regulations on nutritional labeling, advertising of foods and beverages targeting children and adolescents, and taxes to reduce consumption of unhealthy foods.

6. Favor as sponsors, donors or potential supporters, local producers of basic healthy foods* and/or organizations who are in favor of a healthy diet.

7. Ensure that the accepted sponsorships support the themes, presentations, speakers, conferences, and in general, activities proposed or approved by the scientific community of this society.

8. Supervise sponsors so they do not emit “educational” messages or those for “entertainment” and/or for orientation of attendees, without prior consultation with the COI Committee. In the case of gift giving or promotional materials, these will have to be authorized by the COI Committee.

9. Encourage speakers at SLAN events to publicly disclose their interests, at the time of registration. The first slide of their presentations must contain this information. In the case of posters, these must also include a declaration of their interests as part of their content.

10. Periodically inform its members and the community of contributions, donations, sponsorships, agreements, support, etc., with/from the food industry or any other sponsor. This report will contain the name of the sponsor, the amount contributed and the specific activities and agreements for which the amount was allocated, and this may be consulted in a SLAN web page called “Record of Transparency”.

11. Form a committee of nutrition professionals that will have as its objective to propose educational activities, including case studies, that will allow its members to know more about COI aspects. It will also make decisions on controversies and doubts that may arise and will update the present guidelines according to the needs of the society and its members.

12. Having found a COI, the COI management committee will:

1) Acknowledge the conflict
2) Manage the conflict and make it public
3) Propose to the SLAN Board of Directors the suspension or prohibition of the activity, when needed, to protect the public and the association’s interest.

In the case that a potential COI is identified, but because of its nature is difficult to issue an opinion on its seriousness and the requirement to suspend activities, support will be sought from expert organizations in transparency and accountability, so that they issue their opinion to this regard.

This committee considers that the established guidelines will allow the Board of Directors of the society to make initial decisions on how to proceed with potential sponsors. Since this is a dynamic theme that constantly evolves, the committee acknowledges that continuous adjustments will be required.

**Acknowledgements**

The authors thank Hala Boukerdenna, technical officer of the World Health Organization, for her valuable participation as an observer in the corresponding discussions of this topic, as well as in the revision of the document. They also thank Dr. Juan A. Rivera Dommarco, president of SLAN, for the invitation to be part of the Conflict of Interests Committee of the SLAN, and for his interest and commitment to the topic. His leadership made the adoption of this Position possible.

**Financing**

This Posture did not have any type of financing associated to its creation and publication.

**Article information**

The members of the Conflict of Interest Committee of SLAN made the Position on the Management of Conflicts of Interest proposal, which was reviewed, modified, and approved by the members of the SLAN Board of Directors for the period 2015-2018.

**Declaration of conflict of interests** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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* Healthy food: That which provides energy and nutrients that the body needs, besides being free from contaminants and not causing any harm.
References
