HOW DO UNHEALTHY COMMODITY INDUSTRIES INFLUENCE PUBLIC POLICY?

PETER J. ADAMS

Centre for Addiction Research, The University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

Presenter’s email: p.adams@auckland.ac.nz

Background: Why, over the last 50 years, have successive governments in New Zealand, like their counterparts overseas, consistently favoured less effective interventions for tobacco, alcohol, gambling and unhealthy food and beverages over what research indicates are more effective interventions? How have these unhealthy commodity industries achieved such disproportionate influence on public policy?

Main Issues: The ways in which producers and retailers of these unhealthy commodities seek to influence policy will be broken down into three pathways or chains of influence. First, on the public good chain, a series of relationships aim to impress on the public and policy makers that these industries are a vital part of our economy, that it is individual consumers and not the system that are responsible for problems, and that industry is actively doing something about these problems. Second, on the knowledge chain, industries play an active role in both influencing research funding mechanisms and in managing how it is used and interpreted. Third, on the political chain, industry actors strive to form relationships of mutual obligation with political actors through an array of personal contacts and favour exchanges. These three chains act together in driving pro-consumption gambling policies.

Conclusion: In pursuit of effective public health responses to these unhealthy commodities we urgently require an improved understanding of the tactics and mechanisms by which have succeeded in diverting policy in the direction of individualised and less effective measures.