

Commercial Determinants Of Health



SPECTRUM

SHAPING PUBLIC HEALTH POLICIES
TO REDUCE INEQUALITIES AND HARM

Advancing understanding of the Commercial Determinants of health

Evidence that some commercial actors, particularly the largest transnational corporations, have been causing significant levels of avoidable ill health has been growing and has been increasingly referred to as the 'commercial determinants of health' (CDOH).

However, there was no clear conceptualisation nor accepted definition of the CDOH.

Much work in this field had focused on the tobacco industry, while other health-harming industries (HHIs), such as food, alcohol, and gambling, had received less attention. Previous research has also focused almost entirely on the problem, rather than solutions. SPECTRUM aimed to address these gaps.

Impacts

SPECTRUM researchers developed some of the first research on the CDOH and the scientific and political practices of HHIs. They reviewed existing frameworks of the social determinants of health showing a [failure to address the CDOH](#); edited and contributed many chapters to the [first book on the CDOH](#); made major contributions to the [Lancet Commission Series on the CDOH](#) that developed the [first conceptual model](#) of the CDOH; and developed the first pan-industry models and taxonomies [of corporate political activity \(CPA\)](#) and [scientific practices](#). This body of work has delivered impacts in three key areas from local level in the UK to global level:

1. Significantly advanced understanding of the CDOH and its importance to public health

This research ensured that the importance of the CDOH was recognised globally, influencing discourse and action at WHO and other UN agencies to consider the CDOH in reports on [social determinants of health](#), [obesity](#), [food security](#) and [digital health](#). It prompted a [WHO Euro report](#) focused on non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and the CDOH and in which SPECTRUM researchers played a key role in both authoring and advising on the report. All reports cited SPECTRUM research.

Reacting to The Lancet Series, the [WHO Director-General, Dr Ghebreyesus](#), underscored the urgent need for action on the CDOH. SPECTRUM researchers advised the newly formed [WHO Economic and Commercial Determinants of Health](#) work programme, established in 2019 to lead the WHO action in this area, with many becoming members of the Expert Advisory Group established to support it. Beyond the UN, a report examining how the [Indian Presidency of the G20](#) could advance global public health recommended action on the CDOH, again citing our work.



2. Promoted and supported improved governance in this area

By raising awareness of conflicts of interest linked to industry involvement in both policymaking and science and showing that all HHIs engage in the same scientific and political practices, SPECTRUM's research influenced thinking and action on the improvements in governance required to address this. For example, the CDOH model paper was cited by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to health, Tlaleng Mofokeng, in her [report to the 79th UN General Assembly](#). Her report also stressed that corporations, due to their inherent conflicts of interest, should not “be given such a prominent seat at the policymaking table”.

To help address this need we contributed to a [CDOH Essentials toolkit](#), endorsed by the Association of Directors of Public Health, to help public health professionals develop approaches to dealing with commercial conflict of interest and to similar work for Public Health Scotland. SPECTRUM researchers also presented on this topic at events including in the [European Parliament](#), the [2024 World Cancer Congress](#) and the [Royal College of Physicians](#). Some of these attracted significant [publicity](#) and led to requests for [op-eds](#).

3. Inspired and built capacity for industry monitoring and advocacy worldwide.

Through national and international dissemination efforts and training initiatives including sessions on the CDOH for UK public health professionals and the establishment of the first course on CDOH in 2023 and 2024, which included participants from 23 countries, our work has built significant capacity in public health practice and research. It has also inspired and informed industry monitoring initiatives aimed at tracking and countering the influence of HHIs. Notable examples include the launch of the [Industry Interference Hub](#) of the Community of Practice Latin America and Caribbean Nutrition and Health (Colansa) and a European hub on corporate influence established by an [investigative journalist](#), inspired by the CPA model. A further observatory on industry influence, also based on the CPA model is set to launch in 2025.



About the research

SPECTRUM research that informed these advances includes a [book](#) and [three-part Lancet Series](#) on the CDOH. [Paper 1 of the Series](#) was the first study to develop a conceptual model of the CDOH and serves as a valuable tool for identifying interventions to address the CDOH. [Paper 3](#) detailed potential solutions to the CDOH.

Building on our earlier extensive work on the tobacco industry, we developed some of the first comprehensive research on the [food](#), [alcohol](#), [gambling](#) and [other](#) industries. New findings on the food industry detailed its political practices from [local](#) to [global](#) level. Our research on the Corporate Social Responsibility activities of the [alcohol](#), [gambling](#), and [other](#) harmful industries highlighted their detrimental scientific and political practices.

This work, by showing diverse industries engage in similar practices, enabled us to develop a unified pan-industry [taxonomy of CPA](#).

Using evidence synthesis techniques this study developed a simple model and taxonomy of how health harming industries influence policy. This helps identify what needs to be done to address and counter industry CPA and highlights that policy makers should take the same precautions when developing policy on food, gambling and alcohol as they do for tobacco – exclude those industries from policy-making because of the clear conflicts of interest.

A similar approach was taken to developing the [Science for Profit Model](#), a model and taxonomy showing how diverse corporations influence science.

SPECTRUM researchers also examined the [complex interconnections](#) between commercial practices and health outcomes and the system driving [HHI involvement in policy formulation in the UK](#). This systems approach provides a robust framework for advancing policy interventions on the CDOH. The second paper, by one of our PhD students, Amber van den Akker, won Health Promotion International Ilona Kickbusch Early Career Research Award for 2024.



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