

Ethics and epidemiology: conflicts of interest in research and service

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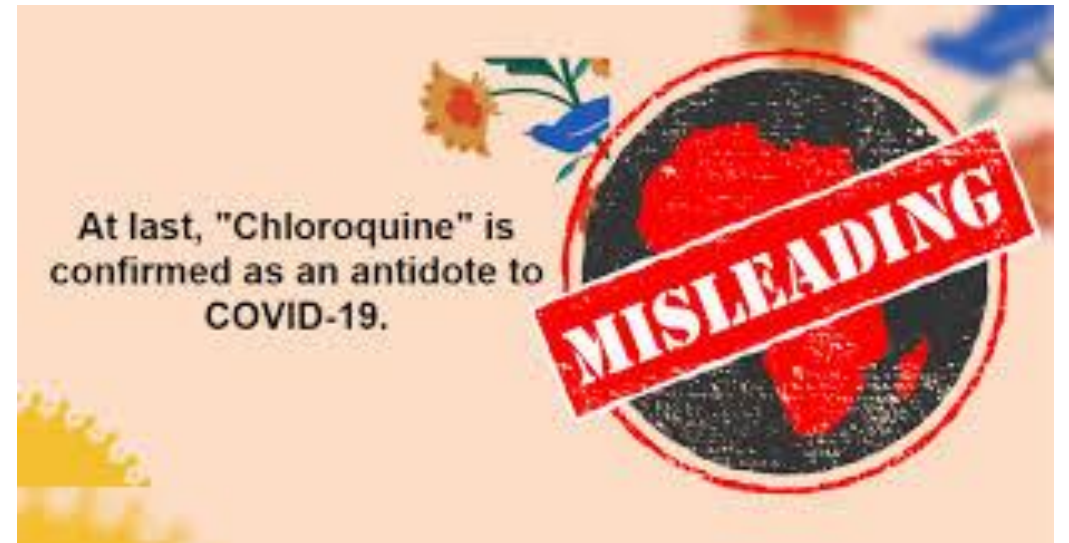
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Why focus on Conflict of Interest?

- Research is key for improving health and preventing disease
- However, Col can negatively impact the integrity of research, undermine quality of evidence and result in flawed policy and practice
- We need to manage Col, build capacity to do so and ensure research is free of vested interests.





• “... undisclosed conflict of interest alone should have warranted the paper's retraction ... However, the editors of the Lancet acknowledged the conflicts of interest in 2004 but [initially] declined to retract the fatally flawed study, instead taking only token actions... (commentaries, etc.)”

• “... Attorney, Richard Barr ... intended to sue vaccine manufacturers for damages on behalf of his growing list of clients with various childhood ailments, and Wakefield was his hired gun, bringing empirical evidence to support Barr's legal claims. ... In total, over the course of their 8-year relationship ... **Wakefield received the equivalent of \$900,000 USD from his lucrative relationship with Barr.** This arrangement was in place well before the now-retracted 1998 Lancet paper in question was published.”
<https://www.awayclinic.com/post/andrew-wakefield-s-undisclosed-conflicts-of-interest>

What do we mean by conflict of interest?

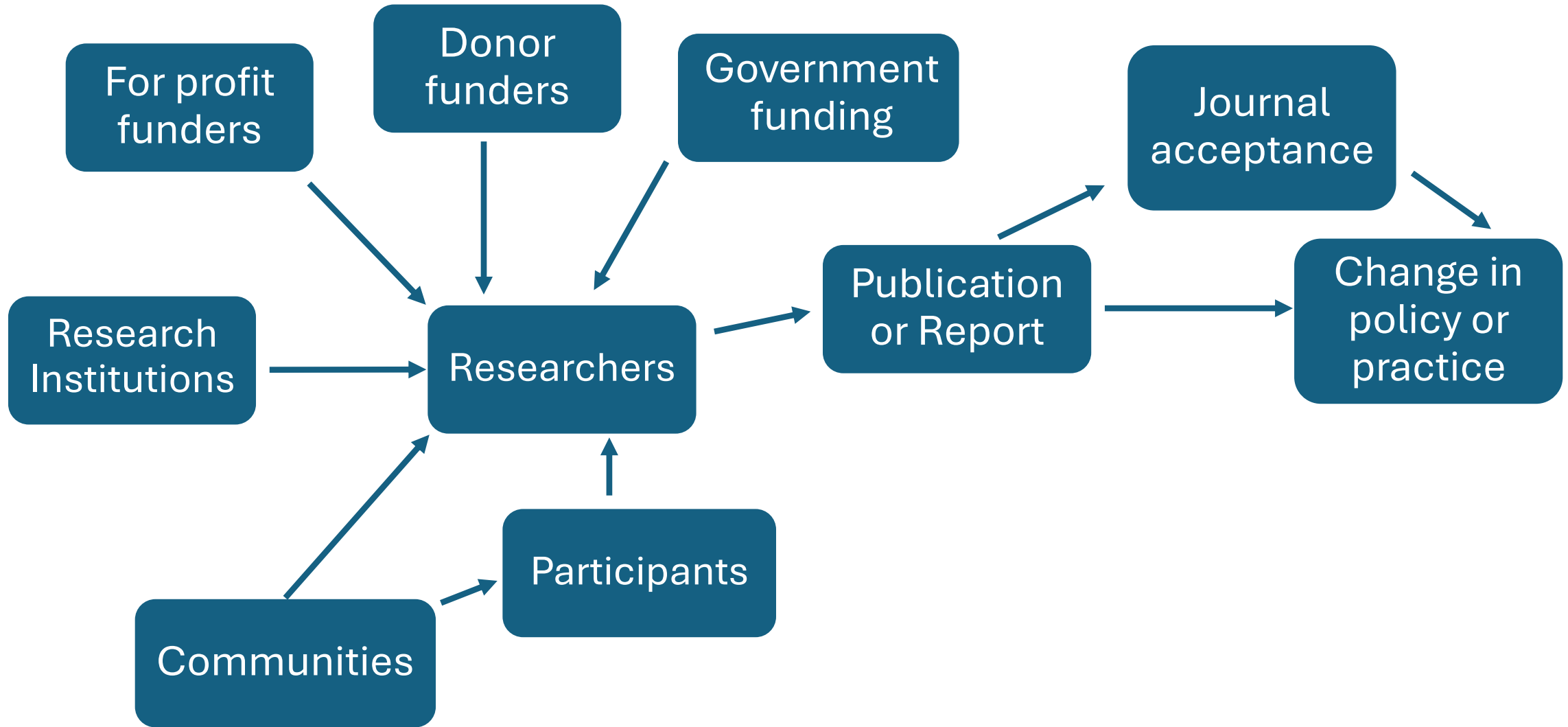
- Conflict of Interest: A a set of conditions in which professional judgment concerning a primary interest (such as a patient's welfare or the validity of research) tends to be unduly influenced by a secondary interest (such as financial gain)' (Thompson 1993, p573)
- ... a set of circumstances where one party's ability to be impartial is at risk of being compromised. It may result in negative impacts on the integrity and objectivity of research and hence undermine overall research quality.
- Third party interest (especially commercial profit) may be at odds with public health goals.
- State pressure on researchers may also compromise independence



- Is disclosure sufficient?
 - Goldberg, 2018: ““disclosure is largely ineffective in correcting for behavior of partiality flowing from COIs” ... → paradoxically “... disclosing party is seen to be forthcoming even where is no relationship to the integrity of the analysis and interpretation.” call for SEQUESTRATION of Col
- Financial versus ‘non-financial’ COI
 - Bero, 2016: “Focusing on interests such as personal beliefs, experience, or intellectual commitments can divert attention from financial conflicts of interest, which have the potential for widespread influence. The result is an erosion of the evidence base ... “Conflation of Col with interests ... serves to muddy the waters about how to manage conflicts of interest ...”, creates ‘laundry list’. → Not all interest are COI → focus on the nature of the conflict = financial conflicts so dominant.

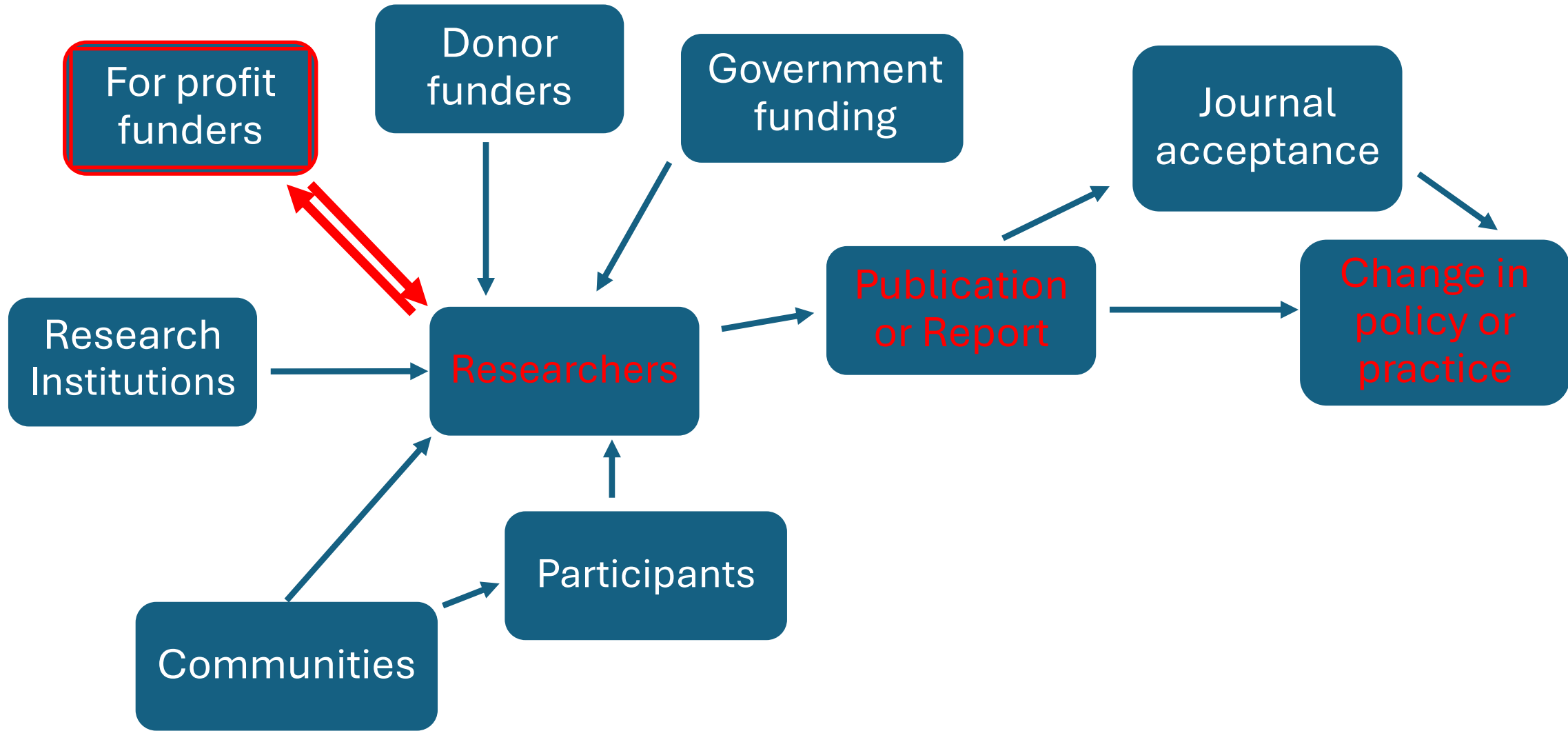
To whom does it apply?

Science Councils overall policy and funding role



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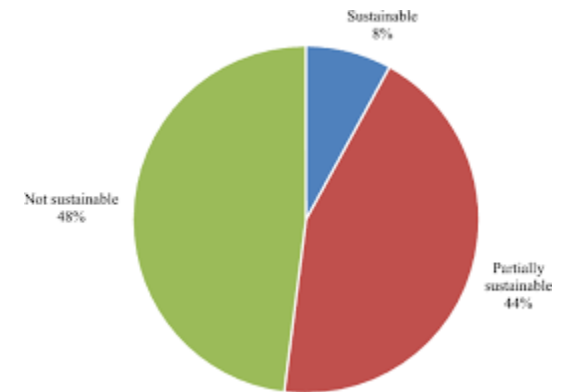
Why now?

- Dwindling research funding in most (not all) areas
 - Growth of public private partnerships
- Offers of private funding difficult to resist, especially in LMICs



Increasing reliance on donor and for-profit sources for health research – esp LMICs

- Matsa, M.M., Dzawanda, B., Mupepi, O. *et al.* Sustainability of donor-funded projects in developing remote minority Tonga communities of Zimbabwe. *Discov Sustain* 4, 34 (2023).
- “Tripathi highlighted the dependency of African institutions on external funding and the insufficient investment in research and development by African governments as bottlenecks to genome editing’s success...” (IITA, May 2024)
- “The introduction of private funders is a notable trend. Over the past 20 years, private donor science funding has increased ... Scientists used to assign priorities based on their research experience. But now, the goals of large, philanthropic bodies are impacting prioritisation ... Does this mean that African priorities are being set elsewhere? (SGCIAfrica, <https://sgciafrica.org/resource/research-funding-in-africa-highlights-from-the-sgci-masterclass-working-paper/>)
- YET ... “State institutions for PPPs in R&I need to be strengthened to enable them to use PPPs for R&I as strategies for advancing technological change in Africa ...” Oyelaran-Oyeyinka et al, 2018



AUB study: Attitudes to accepting funding, 2015-2018

- Corporate influence on health policy
- WHO has developed guidance on managing COI in nutrition policy
- AUB led study: What do Schools of Public Health do when faced with offers of funding from corporate for-profit donors?
- Survey of SPHs in 5 regions
 - > 50% would accept
 - 20% had accepted
 - >60% agreed risk of bias
- Need for more dialogue
- → Governance, Ethics and Conflict of Interest in Public Health Network (GECI-PH)



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ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Attitudes and practices of public health academics towards research funding from for-profit organizations: cross-sectional survey

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