

The Ethics of Affiliation

The Relationship between Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Prevention Agencies and the Alcohol, tobacco and Pharmaceutical Industries

William L. White, MA and Elizabeth A. Tonai, MPH



Copy write 1998 Prevention First, Inc.
Used with permission. All rights reserved.

Executive Summary: The Ethics of Affiliation

The Ethics of Affiliation summarizes the work of 33 professionals who attended a policy forum titled *Building a Solid Foundation: A Symposium on Ethics in Prevention*. The symposium was conducted to examine the relationship between alcohol, tobacco and other drug (ATOD) prevention agencies and the alcohol, tobacco and pharmaceutical (ATP) industries. Throughout the event the participants were deeply engaged in discussing the ethical issues surrounding the funding and management of prevention programs and the circumstances under which program administrators may be tempted to accept ATP monies – circumstances such as, the competition for shrinking financial resources that support substance abuse prevention programs.

The scarcity of resources could act as a catalyst for many substance abuse prevention agencies to begin to look for non-traditional funding sources. The question of ethics arises when the standards and goals of the substance abuse prevention agencies are compromised due to their monetary or other (than funding) relationships with industries that harbor interests contrary to those held by the prevention community. The stated goals of the policy forum were to:

1. Identify the ethical and professional practice issues involved in the question of accepting funds from the alcohol, tobacco and pharmaceutical industries to support prevention programs and services.
2. Identify the ethical and professional practice issues involved in other (than funding) areas of affiliation and collaboration with the alcohol, tobacco and pharmaceutical industries.
3. Seek areas of consensus that could constitute guidelines and recommendations on the management of the interface between prevention programs and the alcohol, tobacco and pharmaceutical industries.

It is often assumed that a relationship between ATOD prevention agencies and the alcohol and tobacco industries is unlikely because of the potential conflict between agency and industry missions. It was under this premise that policy forum participants engaged in a discussion that compared the core interests of the ATP industries with the interests of the prevention field and public health and safety institutions. Participants worked to identify areas where there may be common ground, however, participants soon realized that there are very few areas in which public interest and the alcohol and tobacco industries share a common goal. It is important to note however, that participants felt that there might be some shared goals between pharmaceutical companies and prevention agencies. An example of this is the collaboration of pharmaceutical companies and prevention organizations to stop the abuse of prescription drugs by the elderly.

Ethics of Affiliation

© 1998 Prevention First, Inc.

Used with permission. All rights reserved.

Participants were asked to use an ethical decision making model to assess the amount of harm that could be caused by creating an alliance with the alcohol and tobacco industries. The majority of participants found that significant harm would befall service consumers, individual workers, agencies, the professional field and the community as a whole if alliances with these industries were formed.

Participants worked together during round table discussions to answer five questions related to the appropriateness of accepting funds from ATP companies to be used in prevention programming and the circumstances surrounding other types of collaboration. Participants discussed the role that ATP representatives should and should not be allowed to play in decision-making positions on prevention agency boards and advisory councils.

The final question asked participants to make recommendations about what guidelines prevention agencies should follow in their potential relationships with the ATP industries. Participants made the following three recommendations:

1. Prevention agencies should educate themselves about the history of the ATP industries in the United States and where the interests of these industries may conflict with or align with prevention agencies. More specifically, these agencies should review some of the historical strains that have existed between ATP companies and the fields of substance abuse prevention and treatment.
2. Administrative and fiscal agents of prevention programs need to be educated about the problems that can arise in the relationship between prevention agencies and ATP companies. There needs to be a high level of value congruence on these issues from the bottom to the top of prevention agencies.
3. Prevention agencies should develop a foundation upon which they can make ethical decisions regarding their relationship with the ATP industries. This foundation is made up of a clear mission statement, the delineation of core values of the organization, and the development of an agency code of ethics whose standards can help delineate acceptable and unacceptable prevention partnerships. This foundation needs to be in place BEFORE the issue of accepting funds from, or collaborating with, ATP companies arises.

The policy forum was an initiative to engage the substance abuse prevention field in conversations regarding the critical ethical issues that will ultimately affect prevention programs. This paper was developed to outline possible guidelines and solutions to this important ethical issue as well as act as a catalyst for further action regarding this issue.