



# EDITORIALS

## Unhealthy sponsorship of sport

Tougher and more comprehensive regulation is long overdue

Timothy Chambers *research associate*, Franco Sassi *professor*

Centre for Health Economics and Policy Innovation, Department of Economics and Public Policy, Imperial College Business School, London, UK

The recent sponsorship deal between the England and Wales Cricket Board and KP Snacks is yet another stark reminder of the incongruent relationship between unhealthy products and sports.<sup>1</sup> The harms from alcohol, gambling, and poor diets cost the NHS more than £10bn (€12bn; \$13bn) each year.<sup>2</sup> Yet sponsorship deals between sports and unhealthy products industries are rife, enabling these industries to improve their public image and promote their products. A new, resolute approach to regulating sports sponsorship is long overdue.

Sports provide many physical, social, and psychological benefits<sup>3</sup> and should be a natural ally for health professionals. They are also popular entertainment—97% of people living in the UK watched at least one sporting event in 2018.<sup>4</sup>

Sponsorship is a substantial marketing outlet for unhealthy products, and over 28% of all sponsorship revenue for UK sports comes from the alcohol, gambling, and soft drinks industries.<sup>5</sup> With revenue from sports sponsorship predicted to increase 6% a year over the next five years, exposure of sports viewers' (including millions of children) to the marketing of unhealthy products is likely to reach unprecedented levels without government intervention.

Evidence suggests that unhealthy sponsorship harms both children and athletes. Children's exposure is linked to increased consumption of unhealthy products.<sup>6,7</sup> Athletes sponsored by alcohol companies report riskier drinking behaviour than athletes without sponsorship.<sup>8</sup>

Current self-regulatory voluntary marketing codes for alcohol, food, and gambling are ineffective since many ignore sponsorship of sports. For example, the gambling industry's whistle-to-whistle ban on advertising has stopped gambling advertisements being aired during live sport, but the ban does not cover sponsorship deals.

The UK Department of Health's 2019 consultation paper on prevention continues a disappointing trend of complacency on the marketing of unhealthy products.<sup>9</sup> Past attempts to regulate sports sponsorship, such as the 2011 Alcohol Marketing Bill, were never enacted.<sup>10</sup> In 2015, the government's sporting future strategy advocated for responsible sponsorship, excluding alcohol and unhealthy foods, but no action materialised.<sup>11</sup>

As part of comprehensive marketing restrictions, France and Norway already ban sports sponsorship by alcohol companies,<sup>6</sup> and Italy recently introduced legislation to severely restrict sponsorship by gambling companies.<sup>12</sup> However, regulating sponsorship separately for each unhealthy class of products is a lengthy, complex, and politically fraught approach. It provides market opportunities for equally unhealthy products that remain unregulated and ultimately perpetuates the incongruent relationship between unhealthy products and sports.

### Universal ban

One solution is to introduce specific regulations for sport that cover all unhealthy sponsorship in a unified way, rather than product by product. The Governance of Sport Bill introduced into the House of Lords in 2014 could provide a framework.<sup>13</sup> Although it was unsuccessful, the bill outlined marketing rules that, if adapted, could provide a legally binding mechanism to prohibit the marketing of unhealthy products through sponsorship of sports. Possible options include prohibiting entire industries, such as the alcohol and gambling industries; prohibiting companies with predominantly unhealthy portfolios; or prohibiting all products that do not meet the World Health Organization's nutrient profiling criteria for healthy foods. The bill included sanctions of up to £20 000 for breaches; this is substantially more than the sanctions in the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Act 2002, which has effectively prevented tobacco sponsorship of sports.

The counter argument that removing entire classes of sponsors will undermine the financial viability of sport is easily dismissed. After Australia banned tobacco sponsorship, national sponsorship revenue increased by 45% over the next four years.<sup>14</sup> A UK simulation of a ban on alcohol and gambling sponsorship estimated that 84% of lost revenues would be replaced immediately by other sponsors.<sup>15</sup>

### Alternative funding

Community sports clubs that may struggle to find alternative funds quickly can be helped by government through sponsorship replacement models. For example, a report from New Zealand found that community sports received only 13% of all revenue from alcohol sponsorship and that this could be replaced with

an 0.4% increase in the alcohol levy.<sup>16</sup> Alternatively, sporting bodies such as the Football Association could redirect some of their operating profits to community sport in temporary replacement funds. The Football Association spent £127m in 2018 on “investments in the game,”<sup>17</sup> over eight times the annual budget for Sport England’s community asset fund, suggesting sponsorship replacement is feasible and within its remit.

Some sports organisations have taken a stand against unhealthy sponsorship. The Scottish women’s football team has refused sponsorship from alcohol companies. However, the absence of mandatory regulation leaves an uneven playing field for sports organisations wanting to operate responsibly—the women’s national teams for England, Northern Ireland, and Wales continue to accept alcohol sponsorship.

Viable sponsorship replacement models already exist, and fears that sport would fold in the absence of unhealthy sponsorship are not supported by growth in sponsorship from other industries, historical precedent, or impact evaluations. Government policy is urgently required to rid sports of unhealthy sponsorship and realign sport as a health promoting agent.

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