



TASA The Australian
Sociological Association

TITLE:

Conflicts of Interest in a time of austerity: Perspectives from Australian medical students, researchers and clinicians

Author/s: Christopher Mayes, Wendy Lipworth, and Ian Kerridge

Affiliation/s: Centre for Values, Ethics and the Law in Medicine, University of Sydney

A key feature of neoliberalism is reduced government investment in social institutions, such as education, research and healthcare, during times of economic stress. These 'austerity' measures are often accompanied by pressure for public institutions to partner with private industry as a means of making up for budgetary shortfalls. Such a pattern is clearly evident in the Australian healthcare system, where governments have sought to decrease investment in research and patient care, and a simultaneous intensification of ties between private industry (most notably pharmaceutical and medical device companies), and those conducting medical research, treating patients and making health policy. This trend has, in turn, raised questions about possible 'conflicts of interest' stemming from researchers', clinicians' and policymakers' reliance upon, and loyalty towards, private industry. In this paper we present the results of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with medical researchers, policymakers, clinicians, medical educators and medical students. We describe the ways in which our participants conceptualised the structural influences that 'normalise' conflicts of interest in Australian medical institutions. We then use institutional analysis to map the effects brought about by neoliberal policies and the challenges this has for health care in Australia.