



## Transnational corporations and oral health inequalities; an introduction

Jamieson LM



*Australian Research Centre for Population Oral Health, School of Dentistry, University of Adelaide, South Australia*

In an increasingly globalised world, Trans-National Corporations (TNCs) wield considerable social, economic and political influence, both in the international market economy and within individual countries. The practices of TNCs can have positive or adverse effects on population health through production methods and products, shaping social determinants of health, or influencing the regulatory structures governing their activities. TNCs can contribute to health inequities if the health consequences arising from their practices have disproportionate adverse impacts on vulnerable populations or positive benefits for less vulnerable groups. Despite growing recognition of the implications for health, including oral health, arising from TNC practices, little research has sought to systematically assess the oral health and/or oral health equity impacts of TNCs. In the four papers that follow, we contribute to the discourse around oral health-related inequalities through the lens of power, human agency and TNCs. The papers formed the basis of a symposium entitled *'Transnational Corporations and oral health inequalities'* at the 97<sup>th</sup> General Session of the International Association of Dental Research held June 2019 in Vancouver, British Columbia. The authors responded to the 2014 Lancet-University of Oslo Commission on Global Governance for Health call for greater attention to the health effects of TNC practices and the regulatory regimes in which they operate. The papers overview the role of TNCs in oral health inequalities at an international level, with a specific focus on illuminating their far-reaching influence on our everyday lives, from both epidemiological and sociological perspectives, and the multi-faceted positive or adverse effects on oral health this might have. Key TNC examples are provided by way of the sugar and the tobacco industries, with their impact on dental caries, periodontal diseases and head and neck cancers.

Throughout the papers, we argue that TNCs play a powerful, largely invisible role in perpetuating oral health inequalities among the world's most vulnerable groups in a given society. Friel and Jamieson describe how the liberalization of trade and investment, and unfettered influence of powerful economic interests, including transnational food and beverage companies, has resulted in trade agreements that enable excess availability, affordability and acceptability of highly processed, nutrient poor foods worldwide, ultimately resulting in poor nutrition, oral health diseases

and other non-communicable diseases. In their work on the sugar industry and oral health inequalities, Kearns and Watts describe 'expanders' and 'containers'. Expanders are those who work to make policy action on sugar likely, while containers, as an example, are the TNCs working to prevent it. By using these constructs, the authors frame the problems of caries and the sugar industry. Tomar accounts for how tobacco companies interfered with oral cancer research and the dissemination of findings the 1950s and 1960s. One TNC, Philip Morris Inc., partnered the American Dental Association's periodontal research centre until 1973 and the Council for Tobacco Research supported its dental student research program until 1972. Gibson argues that human agency, defined as the capacity of individuals, communities or societies to make their own free choices and to determine their own destiny, is an important social principle. Another important social construct is the principle of intimacy, which involves the freedom to live one's life in a way that provides a sense of personal identity. As a global society, we wish to promote universal agency through the protection of universal autonomy. However, we preserve the right of individuals to choose their own destiny. The problem is that, despite our best efforts to promote agency and freedom, power frequently operates to confound our attempts; particularly in the light of TNCs.

Unless forceful steps are taken to reduce the influence of TNCs in oral health inequalities, almost all countries, but especially countries with less resources/public health infrastructure, will likely face tremendous oral health inequities in the future. The implementation of comprehensive international campaigns to reduce the influence of TNCs, together with international regulation, may be key to eradicating oral health inequalities as they persist in contemporary society.