



## Profits, Payments, and Protections

# Public Health and the Anticorporate Movement: Rationale and Recommendations

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Institutions and informal networks have formed a movement that is challenging the growing power and pervasive influence of large corporations. The movement's analyses show that the historical development and current function of the corporate entity requires production of a profit regardless of consequences to health, society, or the environment. As a result, public health professionals frequently address health problems related to products, services, or practices of corporations.

There are possibilities for links between public health and the anticorporate movement. Public health research and the professional preparation curriculum should focus on the corporate entity as a social structural determinant of disease. (*Am J Public Health*. 2006;96:1370–1375. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2005.072298)

### MANY PUBLIC HEALTH

professionals are aware of or have been involved in public health problems and issues related to corporate products, services, or practices. Freudenberg<sup>1</sup> described a wide variety of products and practices of what

he termed *disease-promoting corporations*. Included are products such as tobacco, unsafe and polluting motor vehicles, expensive medications, guns, alcohol, and certain foods. Other issues that have generated public health advocacy and research include consumer product safety, hazardous industrial materials, water and air pollution, food supply safety, nutritional content and marketing, and occupational health and safety. Corporations also influence health services. For example, federal funding for some health services such as Medicaid has decreased while the number of people eligible for services has increased<sup>2</sup> in part because corporations have increased employee contributions to health insurance premiums or they do not provide health insurance.<sup>3</sup>

Regulatory agencies have a limited number of employees to conduct inspections of corporations and enforce health and safety regulations.<sup>4</sup> Also, efforts to prevent or minimize damage from corporate practices or products face opposition from large, well-funded, organized corporate opposition,<sup>1</sup> for example, the tobacco settlement<sup>5</sup>

and the automobile industry position on safety and fuel efficiency.<sup>4</sup>

Typically, the field of public health has addressed issues such as these as singular issues, as a specific product, or as a single company or a particular type of industry. Public health could do more along those lines, but as egregious as the harm from some products, services, and practices may seem, the prevention or amelioration of the harmful effects in and of themselves does not address the fundamental structure and function common to all corporations.

Rather than expending efforts and resources to confront a particular type of industry or a single health issue, the field of public health might be more effective with a research agenda and a professional preparation curriculum that focus on the corporation as a societal structural factor in disease. Such an approach is consistent with the historical and contemporary mission of public health. Over the past decade there has been a movement to return public health to its social justice roots, to a focus on the social

determinants of health.<sup>6,7</sup> There has been a call for a third public health revolution that focuses on the distal causative factors of disease.<sup>8</sup> Public health ethics, values, and beliefs identify public health's primary role as that of addressing the fundamental societal structural causes of disease.<sup>9</sup> Public health is increasingly focusing on distal structural factors related to inequities in health,<sup>10</sup> income inequality, economic growth and instability,<sup>11</sup> social relationships,<sup>12</sup> the built environment,<sup>13</sup> and trade regulations.<sup>14,15</sup>

Public health could benefit in several ways from a focus on the corporation as a distal, societal structural factor. Because corporate products, services, and practices provide tangible targets for advocacy and research, such an approach could be more useful than focusing on concepts such as free market fundamentalism or extreme capitalism. Research could examine the influence of the corporate entity on indicators of health status. Academic programs could prepare practitioners to address the corporate role in disease and injury. Public health advocacy activities related to the corporate products



already noted<sup>1</sup> could link to the anticorporate movement. Focusing on the corporation as a societal structural factor might also suggest ways to address issues such as race/ethnicity, gender, age, socioeconomic status, and disability that are often manifest in a corporate setting.

An anticorporate movement's perspective of the corporate entity as a societal structural factor is instructive for public health. Review of that perspective points out the mutual interests in social justice, ethics, and the social determinants of health that public health has with the anticorporate movement.

## THE ANTICORPORATE MOVEMENT

There is an increasing worldwide awareness of and advocacy in opposition to the growing power and influence of corporations, particularly large transnational, for-profit corporations. This opposition has grown in parallel to developments in global trade policy and practice and an understanding of the effects of those on society, health, and the natural environment.

The corporate opposition has the characteristics of social movements described in the sociological literature.<sup>16</sup> Through institutions and informal and formal networks, nonprofit organizations, scholars, and advocacy groups share meanings about the inequities and disparities created by corporate policies and practices. Those groups who are challenging corporations use and create political opportunities to

address corporations through a variety of means, including mobilization of participants for collective action, such as demonstrations at World Trade Organization meetings. The Internet and World Wide Web have extended these networks' ability to inform and mobilize participants. The network leadership has drawn upon historical social movements such as labor, environmental, and human rights to frame their arguments around values such as social justice and health, and to select tactics. The leaders monitor the political environment surrounding issues such as corporate profits relative to the price and availability of medications. The networks address cultural issues such as corporate appropriation of indigenous seeds and medicinal plants. Transformative events in global trade such as the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement trigger the networks to take collective action. On the basis of these features, it seems legitimate to characterize the corporate opposition as a movement.<sup>16</sup>

As is true of other social movements, the movement challenging corporate power and influence includes a wide range of positions. Some organizations and individuals promote corporate responsibility and accountability. Others emphasize a significant restructuring of the corporation. Others on the continuum suggest that a different type of structure than the corporation would serve society better. Because the concerns and activities of those who are taking positions that are challenging

corporations seem to focus on constricting and limiting the growing power and influence of corporations, the term *anticorporate* is used here to encompass the entire spectrum. Some organizations or individuals might object to being termed *anticorporate*, but the use of the term does not imply that all the organizations or individuals cited favor the elimination of the corporation as an entity. I cite literature drawing upon a range of positions, and information used, within the movement.

## THE CORPORATE ENTITY

The anticorporate movement that has been resurgent for at least a decade<sup>17</sup> has explicated the sources and extent of corporate influence,<sup>18</sup> the genesis of corporate rights,<sup>19</sup> and the diverse effects of transnational corporation practices.<sup>20</sup> Corporate critics have examined the culture of the marketplace<sup>21</sup> and corporate branding,<sup>17</sup> privatization,<sup>4,22</sup> and intellectual property rights.<sup>4</sup> Some corporate critics have detailed the practices and policies of corporations in specific industries such as pharmaceuticals,<sup>23</sup> the communications media,<sup>24</sup> university research and science,<sup>25</sup> and academic culture.<sup>26</sup> Others have examined the corporation relative to the spiritual values of the world's major religions.<sup>27</sup> These analyses show the pervasive and increasing influence and power of the corporation.

Analyses by the anticorporate movement suggest erosion of individual and societal rights

because of the consolidation of corporate power from mergers, particularly in the broadcasting and film, automobile manufacturing, agriculture, and petroleum industries.<sup>19</sup> The analyses point out the contrast in size between some corporations and many national governments<sup>19</sup> and the resulting imbalance of power. Corporate critics point out the contrast between the high levels of compensation received by corporate chief executive officers and those of workers.<sup>28</sup> They point out the decrease in the proportion of taxes paid by corporations and the government subsidies and tariff protections they receive.<sup>28,29</sup> They associate these trends with growing inequities in the distribution of wealth<sup>30</sup> and an essentially static 30-year US poverty rate.<sup>29</sup>

Corporate critics emphasize that in the historical development of the corporation, corporate influence contributed to court rulings leading to corporations having the same rights as individual persons but with limited liability.<sup>19</sup> They also focus on how trade agreements give favorable treatment to corporations and include weak or no environmental and employee protections. They emphasize that trade regulatory organizations are undemocratic and dominated by corporations, and that the authority of those organizations supercedes governmental laws.<sup>31</sup>

Corporate critics show that economic theory<sup>4</sup> and current corporate policy and practice emphasize that inherently, by design, corporations must



continuously grow either within their current sphere of business, by expanding into new products or services, or through geographic growth.<sup>32</sup> Of particular concern to the anticorporate movement is privatization of traditionally public resources or services such as drinking water.<sup>22</sup> Critics also believe that corporate expansion manifest as business–government partnership erodes traditional governmental sovereignty over business.<sup>4,32</sup>

Economists and corporate officials emphasize that corporations must maximize profits by reducing costs through improved productivity and externalization of costs and that corporations need to minimize taxation and regulation.<sup>4</sup> Achievement of all these objectives is necessary for a corporation to continually obtain larger profits and increase value to shareholders, the reason for a corporation's existence.<sup>32</sup> As a result, corporations continually focus on increasing the next quarter's profits and increasing their stock prices. Corporate cost-effectiveness analyses must always maximize what is in the corporation's best interests regardless of the effects on society or nature.<sup>4</sup> Because of that imperative, the anticorporate movement particularly focuses on the effects that externalization of costs have on the natural environment, workers, communities, and society.<sup>32</sup>

The anticorporate movement points out that although employees, managers, and board directors may be altruistic in

their personal life, in their corporate role, they are required by law to act only in ways that will maximize benefit to the company's shareholders.<sup>4,19,32</sup> They point out that corporate branding that touts social responsibility or ecology or advertising that attributes human characteristics to corporations or their products are simply public relations campaigns to enhance image. Corporate critics emphasize that if a corporate official, acting on behalf of the corporation, takes action for ethical or social responsibility reasons and the corporation then experiences poor financial performance, that individual can be held accountable for failing to carry out legal responsibility to maximize return to investors.<sup>4</sup>

The anticorporate movement has produced a range of numerous proposals for reforms that they believe are needed to restore balance between the corporation and national sovereignty, maintain the natural environment, protect human rights, and provide a sustainable future.<sup>18,20</sup> Proposals include reform of financial institutions and trade organizations, implementation of alternative business structures, use of different measures of economic progress, and a change in scale of manufacturing, technology, and agriculture. Some proposals emphasize relocation and subsidiarity (i.e., devolve decisions to the lowest governmental level appropriate to the goal and with the competence to institute such decisions).<sup>28</sup> Other proposals call for strengthening and

enforcing antitrust legislation, reducing or eliminating corporate subsidies, banning corporations from political activity, and creating alternate election campaign funding.<sup>18,19,29</sup>

Proposals for restructuring the corporate entity call for periodic review and revocation (as warranted) of corporate charters, removing corporations' right of personhood, and restoring personal liability for shareholders and officials.<sup>19</sup> Some corporate critics believe that because government is the only institution with authority to bring a corporation into existence, governmental regulation and sanctions must be strengthened. Others believe that market strategies such as "shareholder democracy" and corporate governance reform are preferable.<sup>4</sup>

The anticorporate movement uses a variety of strategies and tactics to mobilize participants and influence policy. The movement conducts campaigns to influence trade negotiations and policies. It conducts protests, demonstrations, and educational sessions during the meetings of international trade organizations. The movement conducts counter-economic and prodemocracy conferences.<sup>33</sup> It uses Web sites and stages satirical events to mobilize and inform.<sup>34–36</sup> Some organizations have established corporate monitoring and certification programs.<sup>37</sup> The movement also uses strategies such as cultural jamming, street action, boycotts, and popular education.<sup>17</sup>

Some public health professionals may be reticent to align

themselves with the anticorporate movement. They may be reluctant because many people earn their livelihoods at corporations and some corporations produce beneficial technology, products, and services. They may believe that some corporations demonstrate social responsibility, and they know of corporations that make charitable contributions. Others may believe that corporations can be influenced through ethics education and social responsibility campaigns. Others may believe that rather than a focus on corporations, a fundamental change in the economic system is required.

However, according to the anticorporate movement's analyses of the corporate entity as previously summarized, it is not that some corporations are malicious or potentially damaging and others innocuous in the way they do business. Products or services harmful to health are simply a reflection of the structure and function of the corporate entity. The corporate entity can only function to serve its own interest regardless of the harm or benefits. All corporations operate within these parameters. They have no alternative when confronted with an option between profit and social good. Any outcome other than profit for investors is immaterial.

The anticorporate movement's perspective on corporations suggests that the field of public health needs to address the corporate entity as a distal, structural societal factor that causes disease and injury.



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUBLIC HEALTH

The values and beliefs underlying the code of ethical practice of public health and the principles of the code explicitly identify public health's primary role as preventive by addressing underlying fundamental social structures rather than proximal causes of disease.<sup>9</sup> The field of public health could address the corporate entity in research, in the preparation of practitioners, and by linking health advocacy movements with the anticorporate movement.

There is little research in the field of public health that directly analyzes the relation between the corporation as a societal structure, its fundamental characteristics, policies, practices, and allied business associations, and health status indicators. The boxes on this page show areas of possible ecological research on relationships between corporate characteristics, policies, practices, and measures of health status. They are intended to suggest the breadth and number of possibilities from which researchers can derive specific research questions. Researchers can select a topic from the first box and study whether there is any relation to 1 or more items in the second box. For example, is there an association between key court rulings that expanded the power of corporations and years of potential life lost for certain causes of death, when other significant factors are statistically controlled for in the analysis?

### Measures Related to the Activity of the Corporate Entity

- Historic changes in the definition of the corporation and its rights via legislation, key court rulings, and international trade organizations and agreements
- Trends in corporate tax rates and the proportion of all taxes paid by corporations
- Trends in stock share prices or leading stock market indexes (e.g., Dow 500)
- Trends in types and amount of externalized costs
- Trends in profits
- Trends in the number and size of mergers and types of industries
- Historic changes in laws governing financial institutions
- International flow of capital
- Location of corporate headquarters and other factory sites
- Trends in geographic distribution of employees
- CEO, board director, and worker compensation
- Amount of funds spent on advertising
- Amounts and types of political contributions
- Number, size, and role of business legislative lobbying organizations
- Trends in privatization (e.g., health care, education, information, and water)
- Corporation-favorable policies, practices, and rulings of international trade organizations and international monetary institutions
- Corporate expansion in the use of natural "resources" (e.g., forests)
- Trends in corporate charitable donations

Note. CEO = chief executive officer.

### Public Health Status Indicators

- Infant mortality
- Average life span
- Leading causes of mortality and morbidity
- Years of potential life lost
- Access to health care
- Quality of life
- Behavioral risk factors
- Governmental expenditure for public health services
- Governmental expenditures for health research
- Group health disparities and inequities
- Environmental pollution
- Employee health
- Number and types of health professional preparation programs, and number of graduates
- Ratio of health care providers to population
- Community involvement in health affairs
- Human rights

Additional research is also needed on corporations and public health strategy.<sup>1</sup>

The analyses and strategies of the anticorporate movement suggest ways to enhance public health professional preparation curricula (see box on next page). An understanding of the values underlying corporate culture, how to organize, and how to use political power to advocate are key public health competencies for addressing what have been termed *health-damaging corporations*.<sup>38</sup> The topics address corporate strategies and include activities of public health advocates.<sup>1</sup> Some of the topics in Box 3 overlap currently recommended competencies, but most students would not likely encounter many of these topics in the current public health curricula. If the field determined that the perspective presented here was useful, the specific public health disciplines could detail the specific competencies. Schools of public health could examine how competencies focused on distal structural factors could augment the current competencies, many of which focus on proximal factors.<sup>39</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The anticorporate movement has described the corporate entity as a fundamental societal factor with a specific and limited function. That description is compatible with the field of public health's mission, ethics, and current focus on societal structural factors.<sup>9</sup> The influence of the corporate entity on health status



**Proposed Additions to Public Health Curricula: the Corporation as a Fundamental Structural Cause of Disease**

- I. Theoretical topics
  - History of corporations
  - Macroeconomics
  - International financial markets
  - Trade regulations and organizations
  - Theory of public and private goods
  - Historical court rulings and legislation defining corporations
  - Corporate law and governance procedures
  - Stock market and investment regulations
  - Historical strategies of the labor, civil rights, human rights, and environmental movements
- II. Skills and examples of competencies
  - Perform deconstructive analysis (for example, of corporate messages)
  - Analyze and develop policy
  - Lobby policymakers
  - Write legislation
  - Testify before policymakers and in court
  - Build coalitions
  - Conduct electoral political campaigns
  - Conduct mass media and public relations campaigns (for example, unmasking anti-health corporate values)
  - Conduct fund-raising campaigns
  - Organize, mobilize, and raise funds for grassroots activities, including investor activity
  - Organize and facilitate study circles
  - Use the World Wide Web and Internet for mobilization and education
  - Organize boycotts, demonstrations, other nonviolent direct action

Note. MPH=master of public health.

could be a productive area of public health research. An academic public health training curriculum that incorporated competencies focused on the corporation as an entity could result in more effective prevention efforts.

The advice of Schuftan<sup>40</sup> regarding globalization is applicable to a public health field that aspires to prevent the harmful influence to health

from fundamental societal structures. Schuftan advised, “We need to give a larger intellectual and political scope to our discussions on Globalization and come up with a focused common agenda with overt political interventions.”<sup>40(p4)</sup> Kickbusch emphasized that the third public health revolution needs to be based on radical models and strategies that prevent health from being subjected to the

market<sup>41</sup> and that examine the issues of what are public goods and what are private goods.<sup>42</sup> ■

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