

The recent memorandum of understanding [signed between supplement company Swisse and La Trobe University](#) to establish a Complementary Medicine Evidence Centre (CMEC) looks to me like the latest effort by a corporation to cloak their business interests in a veil of science. Unlike the [UTS Sydney Australian Research Centre in Complementary and Integrative Medicine](#) (ARCCIM), which at least has significant NHMRC funding, the La Trobe version will undertake “independent research” into complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) products that are made by the major (and so far only) donor to the Centre. Southern Cross University also has a [very close relationship](#) with the Blackmores brand of CAM products, due to the personal interest of Marcus Blackmore, [the company Chairman](#). Blackmores claims to spend [a lazy couple of million a year](#) on their branded research centre. [The Blackmores Research Centre studies Blackmores products. Presumably this situation \(so similar to the proposed La Trobe model\) is a coincidence since the research centre is providing completely “independent” research.](#)

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The conflict of interest in such research centres is so [laughably](#) obvious that A/Prof Ken Harvey, a leading campaigner against shonky health products, a life member of Choice and [The Conversation contributor](#), has [resigned his appointment](#) at La Trobe in protest. Ken clearly points out in his [letter of resignation](#) that by accepting the money from Swisse, he believes La Trobe has unacceptably compromised its integrity. His letter cites multiple instances of non-compliance with TGA regulations by Swisse, as well as their disrespect for the regulatory process that governs corporate truth-telling in their industry. [This story](#) from last year gives a bit of background to the quixotic battle Harvey has fought against the massive coffers and unscrupulous business practices of Big Supplement. He has been more effective than the TGA itself at hindering the rampant gaming of the TGA Register of Therapeutic Goods by supplement and vitamin manufacturers.

Deleted: When it comes to the Complementary Medicine Evidence Centre, La Trobe can be expected to adopt procedures aimed at protecting the integrity of its research output. But in my opinion, even the most rigorous processes can't guarantee the independence of the research, nor can they remove the taint of the source of funding. There is no way of getting around this conflict. ¶

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Clearly as a man of principle, he could not be expected to continue his association with a university that has a close relationship to a company with such a history of regulatory infringements. The untenability of Ken's position is underlined by the fact that [La Trobe itself](#) republished on their website one of his TC articles about Swisse's regulatory tapdancing only the previous year!

Ken has been sued, traduced and generally railed against by a multi-billion dollar industry for the hideous crime of insisting that they tell the truth about their products and not mislead consumers. We need another hundred like him. That his own university has decided to take the money on offer from Swisse must be a bitter blow to him. It would be interesting to know whether any other universities were approached by Swisse in a similar way and had the courage to decline the offer.

The infiltration of academia by privately funded CAM institutes is old news in the United States. The Science Based Medicine blog has christened the phenomenon “quackademic medicine” and [written about it at some length](#). It seems the Australian

CAM industry has no need to hide behind astroturfing organisations like the American group the [Bravewell Collaborative](#) to get its agenda attended to. Companies like Blackmores and Swisse can seemingly just offer to fund research institutes and cash-strapped tertiary institutions can't resist. Friends of Science in Medicine [and others](#) have had a bit to say about the irresponsibility of educational institutions lending credibility to pseudoscience and how this practice damages universities' standing as exemplars of scholarship and intellectual leaders within their communities.

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I can say without qualification that none of the much-maligned Big Pharma companies have their own fully-funded research centres at any university. Let alone a branded one where the studies are restricted to a single company's products. It would be utterly unacceptable for the integrity of any university for such an outrageously conflicted institution to be given any support. What would it be like if GSK or Pfizer founded a research institute at a university and forced the researchers to only study their own products?

Imagine the outrage. Imagine what a laughing stock such a research centre would be. That's medical research in clown shoes. That's academic credibility in a cheap suit trying to sell you steak knives.

Vitamin and supplement companies will always be profitable because their sales pitch is based on psychological flaws that everyone has. Just ask the gaming, alcohol and tobacco companies. All of them are massively profitable. Sometimes their cash can even do good, but there's always an angle by which they profit.

Look at these guys up close, and the warts appear. All of them seek to improve their image by splashing money on hanging around with the glamorous, the successful, the smart and the credible. They hope that the magic dust of celebrity and academia will disguise the stench of the swamp they crawled out from. [La Trobe Uni has just decided to join the ranks of the spivs and hucksters of the vitamin industry, and they will now](#) have to live with having a research centre with the academic and professional credibility of the Ponds Institute. Sadly for La Trobe, they won't have Ken Harvey to keep things reality-based.

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If they proceed with this plan as is,

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