"Conflict" Chills Research

By ACSH Staff — April 8, 2008

This piece first appeared in the [1]Washington Times [1].

A new scientific McCarthyism is alive and well in America today. Nowadays, the inquiring mantras come from journal editors and government panel chairmen. It goes like this:

Are you now, or have you ever been, the recipient of funds from a profitmaking institution? Have you consulted for a pharmaceutical company? Have you received research funds from a chemical company? Were you ever a paid speaker at an industry event?

If the answer is yes -- even if your work and scientific reputation are stellar -- under the new scientific McCarthyism you are tainted and untrustworthy, the conclusions of your research are highly suspect and you are most likely ineligible for membership on a government scientific advisory board.

Medical journals now routinely attempt to ferret out what they perceive as "conflict of interest" by requiring that authors disclose any funding they have received from drug companies. The Nader-inspired Center for Science in the Public Interest touts its "Integrity Project," which separates what they perceive as integrity-rich scientists (who do not accept industry funding) from the integrity-challenged scientists (with some type of link to corporate dollars). The witch-hunt is in full gear, with all disclosure short of mandated scarlet C's for the foreheads of those who collaborate with corporate America.

The dichotomy of "good" science versus "suspect" science based on funding is not only misguided and hypocritical, but -- if allowed to dominate the peer-review process -- will have an insidious effect on future collaboration between academic scientists and corporations, collaborations that would benefit all of us. There are a number of reasons why this should not be allowed to happen.

1. The decision to regard industry funding as some uniquely corrupting force overlooks the reality that bias can be introduced into science in many forms -- not just through corporate funding. Why would a consulting history with Pfizer or DuPont be more a source of potential bias for a researcher than a history of membership in environmental-activist groups like Greenpeace or the Natural Resources Defense Council? Why is corporate funding more suspect than funding from innocuous-sounding but agenda-driven private foundations, such as those committed to ridding the nation of what they perceive to be nasty industrial chemicals? These ideologically fueled foundations are rolling in endowment money and happy to support anti-business researchers in publishing junk science in their custom-made, obscure journals.

2. There are myriad nonfinancial factors that can influence scientists and impair their objectivity, from strongly held political convictions to the desire for glory in a given field to a "cognitive dissonance factor," which causes a researcher who has spent years trying to prove a point to skew
data to yield the desired conclusion. Even a well-meaning scientist operating with no knowledge at all of his financial base of support can be misled by his lifelong, passionate commitment to a given theory and his desire to prove it correct.

(3) The current obsession with corporate ties as a "conflict of interest" is not harmless. It has led to regulations and restrictions in government and academia that have restricted scientists, preventing collaboration with external scientific experts and slowing development of new technologies. Such arbitrary guidelines stifle the progress of public health. Government agencies are being denied access to the best available scientific advice if only those who can claim an "industry-free" resume are left in the candidate pool.

Corporations choose the top scientists when they seek advice -- and it is often the less-accomplished scientists, those never sought as consultants or whose beliefs made them averse to contact with corporations, who are left as panel candidates.

(4) Finally, the obsession with "transparency" regarding funding sources has come to obscure what is truly important about scientific research: the quality of the research process and the legitimacy of the findings. If a study is done meticulously and accepted for publication in a peer-reviewed journal, why does it matter who funds it? Does the mere fact a study is funded by a corporation (even an odious corporation) make its conclusions invalid?

The current trend toward cleansing government panels of scientists with any taint of industrial support will leave scientific debate in the hands solely of those who pass the politically-correct test. Credentials, accomplishments, and expertise will be superseded by a candidate's anti-business credentials and leanings. Their adherence to an anti-chemical, anti-business philosophy and the precautionary principle will bring progress to a grinding halt. Is that how we really want crucially important scientific decisions to be made?

A few days after this piece appeared, Dr. Elizabeth Whelan replied [2] to criticism of it -- and ACSH -- from Michael Jacobson of Center for Science in the Public Interest.

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