

Health Hoaxes and Health Hoaxes, Revisited

By ACSH Staff — January 5, 2009

The blog of the Washington Post on January 5, 2009, posted [an item](#) [1] by Jennifer Huget noting ACSH's picks for the previous year's biggest health scares:

That story's just one of 10 health stories from 2008 identified as "hoaxes" by the American Council on Science and Health, a nonprofit group of scientists and physicians that advocates a common-sense approach to maintaining good health.

ACSH insists that claims about the health impact of products, chemicals and other substances and practices be supported by sound science, preferably published in peer-reviewed journals. If the science seems shaky -- by dint of ineffective study design or data failure to establish a cause-and-effect relationship, for instance -- ACSH is skeptical...

And later, on January 12, the WaPo blog posted [this admirably balanced item](#) [2], which elicited some less-friendly comments, seen below it:

Health Hoaxes, Revisited

Several readers took me to task for last Monday's posting about the American Council on Science and Health's list of what the group called the top 10 health "hoaxes" of 2008. Though the blog focused on the fact that we in the media sometimes have insufficient regard for the quality of the science underlying the studies we report on, some of you pointed out that ACSH's refusal to name its funding sources warranted closer attention.

As readers noted, ACSH has historically accepted funds from corporate sources who potentially stand to benefit from some of the organization's findings. Indeed, ACSH's 1985 annual report lists dozens of food, chemical, pharmaceutical and petroleum-industry sources that donated to the group.

According to ACSH's Web site, Elizabeth Whelan says the group, when founded in 1978, initially took funds from foundations only and for its early years of operation made its donor list public. After a few years, ACSH began accepting corporate donations and, after a time, stopped sharing its donor list with the public. Here's its current statement regarding funding:

ACSH accepts unrestricted grants on the condition that it is solely responsible for the conduct of its research and the dissemination of its work to the public. The organization does not perform proprietary research, nor does it accept support from individual corporations for specific research projects.

ACSH founder and president Elizabeth Whelan notes on the Web site that whether they disclose their funding sources or not, everyone assumes the group's shilling for corporations.

That sounds like a cop-out. Transparency can only lend credibility to the group and its work.

But here's the thing: Even when funding sources are clearly made public, it's hard to measure the extent to which those funders influence scientific research, the way it's designed and the way it's presented. The issue has risen to the surface recently in many quarters: Medical journals have tightened their requirements for researchers' reporting potential conflicts of interest. The National Institutes of Health now limits the percentage of stock from a company with which a researcher has a business relationship that that researcher's 401(k) plan can include. And Sen. Charles Grassley (R-Iowa) has mounted an aggressive campaign to ferret out undisclosed financial relationships between makers of drugs and medical devices and researchers -- many of them top names working at major universities.

Every funder -- be it a pro-environment foundation or a for-profit business -- comes to the table with a point of view. Could it be that we tend to be more suspicious when that point of view conflicts with our own?

I'm neither pro-ACSH nor anti-ACSH. But the group's stances, whether they're disputing the findings of a study regarding Bisphenol-A in our bodies or arguing against making the Gardasil vaccine mandatory (while still staunchly supporting the vaccine itself), take us into territory that many people have strong feelings about. Just take a look at the group's site, particularly the section devoted to health facts and fears.

The bottom line: Organizations that enter the public discourse on health-related research should disclose their funding sources, and we should all have the opportunity to consider whether those connections appear to influence the organizations' stances and comments. At the same time, we shouldn't necessarily discount those stances and comments solely on the basis of the funders that support them.

Your thoughts?

By Jennifer Huget | January 12, 2009; 7:00 AM ET | Category: General Health

Previous: The Job of Surgeon General | Next: Sleep and the Common Cold

Comments

Disclosing funding for science work, particularly in the health sciences, is pro forma to prevent allegations of conflict of interest. ACSH is not in line with community standards in this regard. Though ACSH may make some valid points regarding health concerns, their standpoint will always be viewed as questionable by the community at large until the veil is lifted.

Posted by: OneSockOn | January 12, 2009 9:11 AM

Given the current rampant climate of corruption, every organization has a responsibility to be totally transparent. A refusal to do so can only mean they have something to hide.

ACSH has a clear responsibility to disclose all of its funding sources. They are a "consumer education consortium", therefore they have a responsibility to the public. If they have nothing to

hide, why NOT disclose the information?

Elizabeth Whelan's comment that ACSH will be seen as "shilling for corporations, whether they disclose their funding sources or not" is an obvious ploy to rationalize withholding information that the public has a right to know.

Whelan's indifference to a public judgment of corruption demonstrates that ACSH is not meeting its mandate to educate consumers. You can't "educate" consumers without public trust.

If they are not serving the public, then who are they serving? And, what are they accomplishing?

Posted by: caroll1 | January 12, 2009 12:22 PM

Ms. Huget, thanks so much for following up on your original article with a deeper look at this organization. I am impressed with your dedication and professionalism as a reporter. Keep up the good work...

Posted by: jerkhoff | January 12, 2009 12:32 PM

"ACSH founder and president Elizabeth Whelan notes on the Web site that whether they disclose their funding sources or not, everyone assumes the group's shilling for corporations. "

Wow. Ms Whelan has the power to know what everyone assumes!?! Why does she even need to conduct research if she is possession of such unprecedented psychic powers?

Posted by: lostinthemiddle | January 12, 2009 2:13 PM

Thanks, Jennifer, for the follow-up. Too few bloggers on the Post take note of their readers' comments and respond in a reasonable fashion. I have two comments on this follow-up.

First, as others have noted, Whelan's comment that, even if they disclosed their funding, everyone would assume that they're a corporate shill is amusing and disconcerting at the same time. The reality is that there's simply no need for secrecy for something like this kind of work. This isn't national security or corporate secrets for patents. That's why it looks so bad -- if you've got nothing to hide, why are you hiding it? Moreover, if ACSH didn't take corporate funding, I wouldn't think it was a corporate shill. So, in fact, if they reveal their donors and there aren't any corporations on the list (or at least corporations benefiting from a certain angle on a particular topic), well then, she'd be wrong!! No one would assume they were a corporate shill.

Second, Jennifer, (and this is the more important point), this group is very much like the anti-global warming "scientists" and "scientific councils" funded by certain corporate interests. Basically, the idea is to muddy the waters and make it look like no one knows anything. As I said in the previous post, ACSH sets an impossible standard for determining whether a particular man-made chemical is harmful. Essentially, people need to participate in double-blind placebo-controlled studies wherein some are exposed to the potentially dangerous chemical chronically while others are given the placebo. Now, everyone, raise your hands if you want to participate in this study.

crickets chirping

Exactly. No one in their right mind would participate in such a study, and such studies would probably not be ethically permissible (I know about this; I'm a neurobiologist). So, as a result, what

we do in science is conduct experiments in animals, particularly rodents, and examine the human population for correlations, trying to remove any potentially biasing factors. Positive results in either case should require our attention, and repeated positive results should seriously raise the issue of reducing or eliminating the chemical in question. Are these as good as the true double-blind experiments done in humans? No, they are not, but at least these can be done.

My point is that, by ACSH's standards, we would never think a man-made chemical was dangerous and, therefore, should have no problem chronically exposing fetuses, babies, and children (not to mention everyone else) to such chemicals.

In fact, to a scientist's eyes, it is the fundamental "unscientific-ness" of the group that makes it obvious as a corporate shill -- not their funding source.

Posted by: rlalumiere | January 12, 2009 2:48 PM

ACSH would disclose if they weren't hiding something they don't want the public to know.

We should assume therefore that ACSH = Industry SHILL.

Posted by: im1dc | January 12, 2009 4:01 PM

The point is not what a reader might demand. It is what the Washington Post ought to demand. And that is openness. Always. All the time. I understand that there are situations in which sources must be protected. Corporate funding of what bills itself as an unbiased source of scientific information isn't one of them. Stop publishing their handouts and we've got the perfect solution.

Posted by: valerieprintemps | January 12, 2009 4:10 PM

Ms. Whelan uses a throwaway line that I found telling: "wealthy Naderite organizations." Disparagement and envy in just 3 words - that's good writing!

Posted by: mattintx | January 12, 2009 5:03 PM

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