Non-Industry-Funded Research Can Be Biased, Too

By ACSH Staff — April 1, 2009

For almost 100 years, industry has been a powerful motivating force in the creation of new technology and the underwriting of scientific research. But in the last two decades, there has been a campaign to decry industry funding, claiming that such funding is tainting research.

It is not who funds the research; it is the quality of the research that counts. This rush to judgment against industry-funded science is problematic.

Right now, there is a lot of attention on the issue of disclosure. But the focus is on only one type of disclosure, and that is financial bias, specifically industry-funded financial bias.

The point is: We all have a bias. We all bring something to the table. So it is a good thing that we disclose what that bias is. Is it industry-funded science? Fine. Let's disclose that, and let's encourage everyone to disclose what their other biases are, whether it's that they work for the government and perhaps want to get more funding for their agency, or whether they are doing work on behalf of the pharmaceutical industry.

All scientific research, regardless of the way it is funded, needs to be considered with the utmost skepticism. Every study should be evaluated to determine whether there is something wrong with it. To put additional skepticism on industry-funded research just because of the way the work is funded means that less scrutiny is being placed on non-industry funded research.

By focusing on only one potential for bias, we are undermining the science. If some industry-funded research is bad science, that researcher should be kicked out of the field. But to say that the researcher should be criticized or punished for accepting industry funding to do his or her research misses the point. This is where the witch hunt is.

For me, the problem is when you get the science wrong, regardless of whether you were funded by industry or whether you did it for free. Get the science right, and I don't care about the potential bias. The whole point about bias is that it is a red flag, allowing us to forget the science.

Let's look under the hood. Let's look at the data, at the methodology, and not use a shortcut, which is to ask: "Is it industry funded or is it not industry funded?"

Right now, if a study is funded by industry, its credibility is called into question. But if it is funded by a nonprofit, the assumption is: How could it be wrong?

This is a real problem for patients. I've talked to senior officials at the FDA who said scientists who have worked for industry are afraid to serve on FDA panels because they fear they are going to be seen as non-credible. So now you have FDA panels that are made up exclusively of scientists who have never worked with industry, either because they are not good enough to get hired by industry, or they are so anti-industry they are unwilling to work for industry. So you've got panels
that are skewed and filled with people who are either not qualified or anti-industry. This does not serve consumers.

Such attacks on industry-funded science are part of an anti-industry campaign that undermines the interests of the consumer. The current efforts to discredit any industry-funded research--and to do so without the balance of equal skepticism about other types of potential for bias--do not serve patients' interests.

See also: ACSH's report on *Scrutinizing Industry-Funded Science* [1], by Ron Bailey.