

Scientists Lash Out at Corporate Attempts to Manipulate Science

By ACSH Staff — March 6, 1998

New York, NY March 6, 1998. Scientists associated with the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH) today deplored attempts by some American corporations to manipulate scientific findings by withholding funding when research results displease them.

Citing a recent and blatant example involving the Kellogg's Corporate Citizens Fund, ACSH President Dr. Elizabeth Whelan, in a letter to Kellogg CEO Arnold G. Langbo, wrote, "It is apparent to us at ACSH that Kellogg terminated our support because we did not choose to bow to Kellogg's party line that fiber is a health panacea for preventing, among other things, colon cancer."

The missive to Kellogg from ACSH was prompted by a letter from Kellogg informing the council that the company was cutting off its support because ACSH was not assisting the company in its "continuing endeavors to bring public health messages to the consumer."

"Kellogg's 'public health' message," said Dr. Whelan, "must be based on their business objectives rather than on the sort of peer-reviewed, sound scientific methodology that we use at ACSH."

ACSH scientists are troubled by the fact that corporations now are attempting boldly to manipulate science to improve their sales. Dr. Whelan also noted that "certain sinister elements in corporate America think they can influence the sacred scientific method with their dollars. But such tactics, she added, "cannot and will not be tolerated."

ACSH, which is now celebrating its 20th year in public health education, accepts only no-strings-attached contributions from individuals, foundations, and corporations.

For more information on this disturbing trend in corporate America to attempt to manipulate science for business purposes, please contact Jeff Stier, ACSH Director of Development and Media, at (212) 362-7044 Ext. 225.

March 5, 1998

Mr. Arnold G. Langbo
Chairman and CEO
Kellogg Company
One Kellogg Square
PO Box 3599
Battle Creek, MI 49016

Dear Mr. Langbo:

I was astonished and saddened to read the enclosed letter from Victor Fulgoni III, Ph.D., Kellogg's

Vice President for Nutrition, in which Dr. Fulgoni abruptly ended almost ten years of modest support for ACSH from the Kellogg's Corporate Citizenship Fund.

I am writing to you, personally, Mr. Langbo, because I found Dr. Fulgoni's reason for terminating our support to be both myopic and insulting to ACSH and the nearly 300 distinguished scientists affiliated with our efforts. Specifically, I refer to his statement that Kellogg is withdrawing ACSH's grant:

"...to be able to support organizations whose activities are consistent with our business objectives and who will assist us in our continuing endeavors to bring public health messages to the consumer."

It is apparent to us at ACSH that Kellogg terminated our support because we did not choose to bow to Kellogg's party line that fiber is a health panacea for preventing, among other things, colon cancer. Clearly, Kellogg's modest contribution to ACSH could not have represented a significant budgetary matter to a company whose net income is in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

Indeed, the letter informing us of the termination of Kellogg's support is the clearest evidence we have had to date of a corporation's attempting to manipulate the outcome of ACSH studies by withdrawing support when the results don't please.

Our publications, while they are very positive about the health benefits of dietary fiber, refrain from making the specific claim regarding colon cancer simply because that claim is not supported by medical evidence.

Were we to offer such a quid pro quo, it would warm the hearts of those critics (like the Center for Science in the Public Interest) who claim that ACSH's funders influence our views. The withdrawal of the Kellogg grant is ample evidence that our critics are half right: funders do attempt to influence our views and they punish us if we choose not to comply. But ACSH's critics are wrong about the other half: Our impartial scientific peer-review process ensures that science prevails in ACSH publications.

The termination-of-support letter characterizes ACSH as an organization whose activities are both inconsistent with Kellogg's business objectives and contrary to your efforts to bring public health messages to consumers.

I have reflected on this indirect characterization of ACSH, particularly in light of two recent reports we have published (enclosed):

* Colorectal Cancer: Myths, Facts and Possibilities and

* Dietary Fiber.

Both publications explore topics that might be characterized as having relevance to Kellogg's "business objectives," namely, the selling of cereal products.

I am forced to conclude, however, that these two reports offended the corporation, or that in some way they were not "consistent with your business objectives." In both publications we rightfully praise the health value of cereal fiber in the diet. But in both we also note that the role of cereal fiber and fiber generally in the prevention of colon cancer remains speculative.

Dr. Fulgoni explained to Dr. Ruth Kava and to me that Kellogg executives were angered by ACSH's reference, in an earlier publication (Cancer in the United States), to the fact that cereal fiber had never been established as a protective factor for colon cancer. Now it seems we have "transgressed" again. But of course, in reality, we have simply reported what the peer-reviewed literature reflects.

As you know, for twenty years ACSH has been the only organization actively willing to engage in ongoing public debates with such self-appointed "consumer advocates" as Michael Jacobson. We've been there to counter CSPI's claims as he has attacked virtually every aspect of modern-day food technology, whether it be caffeine, sugar, dietary fiber, the fat-replacer olestra, dietary fat and cholesterol, moderate consumption of alcohol or whatever other alleged carcinogen, toxin, or "killer" ingredient his organization has singled out for indictment.

While a responsible corporation's business objectives are usually consistent with ACSH's science-based conclusions, it is possible that, on occasion, our science and your company's business objectives may differ slightly. I respectfully submit, Mr. Langbo, that in such rare instances "corporate citizenship" calls for perspective.

In your decision not to support ACSH, you are disarming the only organization that actively opposes the food zealots' pseudoscientific pronouncements and doing so simply because our publications reflect mainstream scientific opinion: that cereal fibers have not been established as a means of reducing the risk of colon cancer.

With this perspective in mind, I ask that you please reconsider your decision and that you continue to support a group of credible, mainstream scientists who defend sound science but who cannot support corporations that resort to hyperbole to promote the value of products.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth M. Whelan, ScD., M.P.H
President

cc: ACSH Board of Directors

Victor Fulgoni III, PhD

Michael Friedman, Acting Commissioner, Food and Drug Administration

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