

◆ Keynote Address: Undue Influence: When Private Interests and Public Science Collide

Speaker:

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The right to search for truth implies also a duty: One must not conceal any part of what one has recognized to be true.

—Albert Einstein

Biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies are providing over \$1.5 billion for biomedical research in the United States alone, according to Miriam Shuchman, a physician, bioethicist, journal editor, and keynote speaker. Collaboration between industry and scientific research institutions is essential because sources of federal funding are waning. Although society depends on industry to develop useful products from scientific discoveries, Shuchman said, conflicts of interest sometimes occur. These conflicts can cause negative publicity for corporations and losses of credibility for medical and scientific researchers. According to Shuchman, the welfare of patients also suffers when public-private partnerships are less than ideal. Shuchman presented the following better-publicized cases in which private corporations attempted to interfere with the exposure of questionable scientific findings and the publication of research results.

Betty Dong, PharmD, and Synthroid

In the late 1980s, the makers of Synthroid, a synthetic form of thyroid hormone, tried to prove that their drug was superior to less expensive alternatives. The company contracted with Betty Dong, a pharmacologist working at the University of California, San Francisco, to conduct research. However, Dong's results showed that Synthroid was not a superior drug. Dong's findings had the potential to save patients an estimated \$350

million. The same findings would have cost the makers of Synthroid substantial profits. According to Shuchman, the company threatened legal action and tried to cancel publication of Dong's paper, which had been submitted to the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*. Because the company's representatives claimed that their contract with Dong entitled them to cancel publication of all data, Dong's paper was withdrawn. In Shuchman's opinion, the university did not stand up for Dong and her collaborators, who lost years of research time and suffered losses of reputation. Dong's paper eventually was published in *JAMA*, but only after outraged scientific supporters brought her case to the attention of the press.

Bruce Psaty, MD, PhD, and Calcium Channel Blockers

In the middle 1990s, Bruce Psaty presented unpublished data at a meeting of the American Heart Association. Psaty's data suggested that calcium channel blockers caused an increased rate of heart attack in patients who were taking the drugs to control hypertension. Newspapers and radio broadcasts publicized Psaty's findings, causing manufacturers of calcium channel blockers to lose market shares. Pfizer used the Freedom of Information Act to press for Psaty's research documentation from the University of Washington-Seattle, where Psaty worked. Shuchman said that Psaty received little support from the University of Washington and that the company discredited his reputation. Despite the controversy surrounding his data, Psaty's paper was published in August 1998.

Nancy Olivieri, MD, and the Drug L1

In the most recent case described by Shuchman, Nancy Olivieri, of the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, conducted research on a new drug for treating thalassemia. Olivieri and her colleagues signed

a contract with Apotex Research Inc to develop and market the drug. After publishing a research paper stating that L1 was effective, Olivieri began to notice that the drug lost effectiveness in some patients. Apotex formed a panel to review her data. According to Shuchman, Apotex pressured Olivieri to withhold the negative data. Apotex claimed that the contract signed with her entitled it to confidentiality. Eventually, Olivieri's paper was published. However, Olivieri was removed from her hospital position as head of the thalassemia research program. Olivieri received support from the outraged academic community and was reinstated in her position at the hospital. In Shuchman's opinion, in spite of the reinstatement, Olivieri's scientific credibility was affected by the dispute.

Summary Points

These cases showed how scientists can lose credibility and patients can suffer when corporations attempt to conceal scientific information. Shuchman closed her presentation with the following summary points:

- Scientists can pay a huge price when research data become controversial.
- Federal agencies can provide valuable support for scientists in such situations.
- Outraged supporters from the scientific community can be instrumental in bringing cases like these to the public's attention and in protecting scientists.

Shuchman said that journal editors have not been able to do much to influence these types of situations, although some audience members provided alternative solutions to the problem. One editor suggested that if authors were required to disclose whether their research was supported by industry and whether the industry had control over the research data, journals might discourage undue influence from private corporations. ■