Lessons from the Edge of Politeness: Conflicts of Interest and Government

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Perhaps it's not polite, as Barbara Mintzes hinted, to talk about the tainting of medical science by commercial interests. Perhaps it's pessimistic, as Mike Romaine felt, to suggest that the conflicts facing government researchers are so pervasive that even a political overhaul may be too little too late. But as Iain E P Taylor made clear in this passionately presented workshop, the debate over conflicts of interest among scientists, regulatory agencies, publishers, and commercial industries will not soon subside.

Mintzes opened the session with exposures of blatant and subtle ways that regulatory decisions in medicine can be manipulated and influenced by the pharmaceutical industry. The paths of influence she described are many: skewed design of clinical trials, selective reporting of results, biased conclusions in favor of funders' products, exaggerated benefits or downplayed harms (or both), secrecy in regulation, lack of disclosure of financial ties between guideline authors and manufacturers, and other client-service conflicts resulting from industry financing of drug regulation. Furthermore, she believes, industry influence can make it harder for critical voices to be heard. "There is a higher bar", Mintzes said, "for research that is critical of the pharmaceutical industry."

That bar is also high for Canadian government scientists who conduct and report research in environmental and natural-resources sciences, said Romaine, who suggested that voices critical of the interests of private "partners" may be stifled or rebuked. He noted that over the last century government research has gone from independent to public to heavily privatized. Accompanying that evolution has been "a paradigm shift from the search for knowledge to improve understanding to a search for 'results' to enable greater profits".

Caught in between, he said, are government scientists who see the growing disparity between public policies and sound science but are becoming "muzzled and isolated", hampered by program constraints, management dictates (aka politics), and restrictions on access, review, debate, and participation.

Taylor's fervent overview of "the GM conundrum" highlighted similar conflicts and concerns over the reporting of the safety and efficacy of agricultural products, such as genetically modified (GM) organisms. "Journal editors and peer reviewers have some responsibility to ensure that the risks posed by new GM products are considered, especially if part of regulatory approval is to be based on peer-reviewed publications", he said.

Politeness and pessimism notwithstanding, some positive steps were proffered to help stem the burgeoning conflicts of interest in scientific research and publishing.

Mintzes hopes for "a radical rethinking of how we finance medical research and regulation", but she would settle for accountable, transparent regulatory procedures (including full public access to efficacy and safety data), funding of regulations out of general tax revenues, clear rules governing conflicts of interest, explicit standards for disclosure of harmful effects, and adequate public financing of health research.

Romaine would add greater awareness of and more focus on interdependence and collaboration between government scientists and others, including medical researchers.

Suggestions from the audience included seeking funding from places that have no financial incentive (such as the telephone company instead of a drug company), rewarding philanthropy that funds truly unbiased studies, and training journalists (the "translators") to interpret carefully what reported outcomes really mean for a person's life.

As an overarching consideration to pull us back from the edge, Taylor said that "the editorial community must be diligent to avoid biased peer review".

Those who missed out on this lively hour might consider participating in the CSE Retreat on Conflicts of Interest in Scientific Publication in October.