

Selling our souls: when medical research dances to the tune of the marketplace

Arthur Schafer, Winnipeg

Pity the poor medical school dean. You work your fingers to the bone tickling the egos of drug company CEO's. You market the excellence of your researchers to the companies, and induce them to fork over millions of dollars in research funds, sending your university to the top of the league table. And then some damn fool of a researcher, Nancy Olivieri, say, proceeds to offend the biggest potential donor with a cacophony of whistle blowing. After all your hard work, the promised fifty million dollar donation vanishes.

That, in a nutshell, was the sorry plight of the previous University of Toronto Medical School dean. Now, a new dean is earning his decanal stripes in the courtship of the pharmaceutical giants and, wouldn't you know it, another scandal hits the front pages. Lawsuits are flying. The U. of T. looks bad, again.

It's that old bugbear, academic freedom.

The world's pre-eminent medical journals were much praised last month for their new policy, whereby researchers are required to keep personal control of their research design and data – and not cede control to their drug company sponsors. But this policy is not likely to do much good if our leading research universities sack researchers who show too much independence.

The same faculty of medicine that wouldn't support Olivieri, in her battle for academic freedom, has discovered that an eminent psychiatrist it was courting, Dr. David Healy, carries an offensive odour. When Healy gave an invited lecture last year at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, affiliated with the U. of T. medical faculty, the reservations he expressed about the side effects of Prozac allegedly upset his academic audience. It's possible, as well, that his criticisms offended the Eli Lilly pharmaceutical company, which makes Prozac, and which just happens to be a major donor to the Centre.

Ultimately, Dr. Healy's concerns about the possible adverse side effects of Prozac for some patients will be resolved by careful scientific research. But raising such critical questions should not, surely, be a hanging offence.

Sadly, the academic leader of our country's most prestigious medical faculty does not see anything worrying about the denial of an academic position to an eminent medical scholar immediately after he express views critical of an Eli Lilly product. His predecessor could see no issue of academic freedom in the Olivieri case, and our current U. of T. dean can see no issue of academic freedom in the Healy case. The Olivieri problem was merely a scientific dispute", and the Healy job-offer- withdrawal is merely an issue of "lack of fit" with other staff at the Centre. Thus, no corrective action is needed.

It almost seems as if successful candidates for medical deanship at the University of Toronto have all passed the same initiation test. They have proven their suitability for the job by demonstrating that they are incapable of recognizing even the most blatant threat to academic freedom. If they smell the stink, they know how to hold their nose and walk away.

How did we get into this mess?

The Canadian public relies heavily on our medical faculties and hospital research centres to tell us whether new drugs are safe and effective. Unfortunately, Canadian governments have been unwilling properly to fund the necessary research effort. Researchers are left scrambling like mad to locate money for their research.

Into this vacuum has stepped an ever-opportunistic and ever-more-profitable pharmaceutical industry. Universities, hospitals, and researchers enter into alliances or “partnerships” with industry, thereby creating an “academic-industrial complex”. As we are seeing, most dramatically in the cases of Olivieri and Healy, but in countless other cases as well, when universities embrace the sponsorship of business, business values can easily crowd out the values of scientific integrity.

Cash-starved universities and hospitals stand to make hundreds of millions of dollars from partnerships with drug companies. We shouldn’t despise the administrators who want to promote the best interests of their institutions. Raising the money to build and maintain fine facilities, to hire outstandingly good researchers and to fund their experiments are all commendable goals. Nor is the accelerated development of life-saving treatments something at which we should sneer.

Unfortunately, as is becoming increasingly clear, the values of the marketplace are corroding and corrupting the foundational values of medical science. Scientists are supposed to be impartial and objective, but as the editor of Britain’s premier medical journal, *The Lancet*, observes, “nine out of ten papers” concerned with new drugs are found by independent reviewers to be “deliberately skewed in favour of the new products being studied.” Evidence is accumulating [*New England Journal of Medicine*, 1998] that researchers who are funded by the pharmaceutical industry tend to produce industry-friendly results.

In other words, put scientists and scientific institutions in a conflict-of-interest situation, where they are committed to making money as well as to the pursuit of scientific truth, and they will respond just like the rest of us. Only a few individuals and institutions will be outright corrupted, but a very large number will be sub-consciously influenced or biased. Their research, on the whole will be less reliable, and patients will die because of this. Useless or even harmful new drugs will come to market because they’ve not been rigorously and objectively tested. Critics such as Olivieri and Healy will be silenced, marginalized or banished. The soul of medicine will be lost.

That's a high price for the public to pay for sloughing the research bill onto the shoulders of the drug companies. Public health and safety are at stake, as is public confidence in our universities and hospitals. If the public can't trust university researchers, in whom can we place our trust?

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