

Sounding the alarm: what happens when medical journal editors fight back?

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Medical journal editors are fed up and they aren't going to take it anymore. Unfortunately, this story may be a classic case of "too little, too late".

In a joint editorial, published by most of the world's leading medical journals, including our own Canadian Medical Association Journal, the alarm is being sounded: when drug companies fund studies of new drugs, to test them for safety and efficacy, the studies are often dangerously biased and unreliable. Since most research into new drugs is now funded by the pharmaceutical industry, this means that the public can no longer trust in the objectivity and integrity of medical research.

Suppose, for example, that you're one of the hundreds of thousands of Canadians who bunged up her knees as a teenager, playing basketball or soccer. Now you're suffering from arthritic pain. Fortunately for you, there's a new "miracle" drug for arthritic pain, and when your doctor consulted the medical literature, she would have found scholarly studies demonstrating that Celebrex -although it costs vastly more than Ibuprofen, say - has many fewer side-effects than other pain-killers. In particular, the published literature claimed to demonstrate that Celebrex wouldn't rot your guts. Too good to be true, alas. The researchers, handsomely funded by ... who manufacture the drug and stand to make a fortune from its sales, published their results based only on favourable data from the first six months of the trial. Additional data, that showed Celebrex to be no better than aspirin in the gut-corrosion department, were somehow lost or suppressed.

This is a problem. A really really big problem. So, what are the editors proposing as the cure? For starters, they're proposing a whole bunch of rules and sanctions.

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 such partnerships. 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 journal *Nature* recognizes [editorial, 23rd August, 2001]: “There are circumstances in which selection of evidence, interpretation of results or emphasis of presentation might be inadvertently or even deliberately biased by a researcher’s other interests.” 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 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. Ultimately, 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 Healey 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?

