

Funding, Conflicts, and Paradigms

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This past February and March, the *New York Times* published an article (Gardiner Harris and Alex Berenson, "10 Voters on Panel Backing Pain Pills Had Industry Ties," Feb 25, 2005) and subsequent editorial (March 4) concerning an FDA Advisory Panel that recommended marketing of several COX-2 inhibitor analgesics. They cited the Center for Science in the Public Interest, an advocacy group, which found that 10 of the 37 panel members had consulted for or received research support from manufacturers of the drugs being reviewed. The *Times* then observed that, had the votes of the 10 scientists with industry connections been excluded, the panel would have voted to withdraw one of the drugs and recommended blocking the return of another. The *Times* chided the FDA for not disclosing the conflicts of interest of some of its panelists. They went on to point out a "deeper problem" of links between drug companies and medical researchers, which they term *pervasive*. The editorialists suggest that the FDA make a more "aggressive effort to find unbiased experts" or that "medical researchers start severing their ties with industry." Without one of these strategies, they see a "whiff of bias . . . taint[ing] the verdicts of many advisory panels."

I read the *Times* report and editorial as an academic department head with a long-standing interest in psychopharmacology. Academic departments and our faculty members routinely receive funds from the pharmaceutical industry to support conferences, grand rounds, and other educational activities. We often get research grant support as well. Many of our faculty members are on drug companies' speakers' bureaus and advisory panels.

If one convenes a panel of experts on a class of medications, say antidepressants, it is nearly impossible to do so without most, if not all, invitees having multiple financial relationships with many manufacturers. Only a naive observer would argue that bias is impossible or never occurs. When we take funds, either directly as individuals or through our academic departments, when we develop friendships with industry executives, as occurs routinely, we are subject to influence.

In today's paradigm, either one is faced with a panel of experts with acknowledged complex interests and arrangements or one settles for a panel with less expertise. It is analogous to the dilemma that most pharmaceutical trials are funded by manufacturers, that they design protocols and analyses to favor their compounds, yet that there are few additional resources for independent assessments of most therapeutics.

The only alternative is a dramatic shift in paradigm. If we attempt to sever ties between academics and industry, we can remove a large measure of real and perceived conflicts of interest. But doing so could impoverish the field and its progress, and perhaps further diminish the already short supply of physician scientists. Alternatively, we will have to find other sources of funding and models for education and research. Can anyone believe that, in today's economic and political climate, this could occur in the near term? There is great public, political, and media focus on this issue, and in the words of the late Arthur Miller, "Attention must be paid." For the immediate future, the best "disinfectant" will be transparency. At *JCP*, we expect full and accurate disclosure of "interests" regarding manuscripts by authors and reviewers alike.