

A Warning to the ME/CFS Community

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It is a matter of record that there is mounting awareness and concern over the increasing manipulation of science and medicine by global corporations with vested interests which now amounts to a stranglehold.

It seems that this corporate control extends not only to a corrupted peer review process that results in a biased view being presented to the medical community by compliant or ineffectual editors of medical journals, but the US government now insists that scientists must be politically approved before the scientists can participate in meetings of the World Health Organisation.

See for example the following:

- Scientists are "asked to fix results for backer" is the subject of an article on 14th February 2000 by Liz Lightfoot in the Daily Telegraph. 30% of 500 respondents said they had been asked to tailor their research conclusions or resulting advice to suit the sponsor's desired outcome
- There is now acknowledgement by medical science that not only does corruption exist but that it is a considerable problem, especially in psychiatry. In an Editorial in Psychological Medicine ("Publication bias and the integrity of psychiatric research"; 2000:30:253-258), Gilbody and Song state "This issue has been all but ignored in the sphere of mental health. Publication bias needs to be dealt with if psychiatry is going to become more "evidence-based". The recognition of the potential consequences of publication bias has led to important advances in its detection. However, these methods are rarely employed when they should be in psychiatry. This is unfortunate when, compared to other specialities, psychiatry is likely to be especially prone to publication bias. A consequence is that readers of journals are more likely to see studies showing results in a certain direction". In the same Editorial, Gilbody and Song point out the dangers of multiple reporting of studies as though they were different trials (sometimes by "shifting first authorship"): examples of this practice in psychiatry include one trial that was published in one form or another in 83 separate publications
- An article in JAMA by Joan Stephenson ("Biomedical Journals Ponder the Failures and Remedies of Peer Review": JAMA 2001:286:23), revealed how a 1997 study of 26 reports of randomised trials that appeared in the five top medical journals during a one month period (May 1997) and repeated four years later in May 2001 found that there was no evidence that authors even attempted to discuss how their findings have added to the total evidence accumulated from previous research on a subject. Journals can take steps to help improve the scientific soundness of published research, which would help reduce the risk of selective reporting of findings

· In a disturbing report on 13th July 2003 in The Observer ("Anger at advisers' biotech links"), Anthony Barnett and Mark Townsend stated "Dozens of the Government's most influential advisers on health and environmental issues have close links to biotech and drug corporations, according to a dossier of Whitehall documents obtained by The Observer. Internal papers from the Department for the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs (Defra, formerly MAFF --- Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries) reveal for the first time the extent of the close connections between big business and scientists hired to give "independent" advice to Ministers. Many work as consultants for the firms, own shares in the companies or enjoy lucrative research grants from them. A key member of the committee advising Ministers on the safety of genetically modified (GM) products has received research funding from biotech giants Monsanto and Syngentia and he also works for the GM research centre funded by Science Minister Lord Sainsbury. More than three quarters of the members of the committee which advises Ministers on food safety have direct links to major food companies and drug giants. Almost three out of four members of the committee advising Ministers on the cancer risks of chemicals in food and other consumer products either own shares in or work for major biotech and drug corporations. Former Environment Minister Michael Meacher told The Observer "These committees are absolutely critical. They give definitive advice which Ministers at their peril seek to overturn.

I consistently argued that nobody with significant commercial links should be allowed to sit on these bodies. It is vital they are truly independent". Tony Juniper, Director of Friends of the Earth, said "It is now crystal clear how big business is setting the agenda right at the heart of government. How can the public trust what Ministers say if their advice is coming from those with vested interests?" ". Some of these "experts", according to The Observer, actually suggest that there is nothing wrong with this behaviour

· In an article in The Observer on 7th December 2003, Anthony Barnett revealed that pharmaceutical giants hire ghost-writers to produce articles, then put doctors' names on them. Hundreds of articles in medical journals claiming to be written by academics or doctors have been written by ghost-writers in the pay of drug companies. Doctors who have put their name to the papers can be paid handsomely. The journals have huge influence on doctors. An editorial assistant with a medical writing company was so concerned about what she witnessed that she became a whistleblower. There are grounds to think that a significant proportion of the articles in journals such as the New England Journal of Medicine, the British Medical Journal and the Lancet may be written with help from medical writing agencies. One field where ghost-writing is becoming an increasing problem is psychiatry. Dr Richard Smith, Editor of the British Medical Journal, admitted ghost-writing was a 'very big problem' "

· On 29th March 2004 Chris Hunter from the Alison Hunter Memorial Foundation in Australia posted extracts from articles that examined unpalatable truths about peer review that had great relevance to the medical politics surrounding ME/CFS. In summary, it concludes that "The

commercialisation of medical research is a threat to the welfare of patients and to the special relationship between doctors and patients. That relationship is now being assaulted on all sides by money" (Co-cure RES: Opinions on Peer Review: 29th March 2004; 16.28)

- On 30th March 2004, referring to an article in the New York Times ("When Peer Review Yields Unsound Science"), John Herd posted an item pointing out that for some time, the British Medical Journal has presented a very one-sided view of ME/CFS as a psychological condition in its articles and editorials, as has the New England Journal of Medicine. Whether it be within medical journals or government health departments, peer review can have its Achilles heel (Co-cure RES: Peer Review and ME/CFS: 30th March 2004; 23.18)

- On 29th April 2004 in an article in the New Zealand Herald ("Licensed to kill facts the drug firms conceal") Jeremy Laurance stated "The stranglehold the industry has on research is causing increasing alarm in medical circles as evidence emerges of biased results, under-reporting and selective publication driven by a market worth more than £10 billion in Britain alone". Laurance goes on to say "One of the researchers, Tim Kendall from the Royal College of Psychiatrists, said he and his colleagues had been "unnerved" by the possibility that the National Institute for Clinical Excellence could have given wrong or even harmful advice because it did not have access to the full data. That is the over-riding issue. How can we trust the published data"?

The above illustrations are but a drop in the ocean of published concern about the control and corruption of medical science by global giants whose life-blood is profit.

As if the control of medical science by industry were not bad enough, it has long been suspected but now seems certain that governments themselves exert an equally tight stranglehold on a nation's health.

By 2003, the UK Science Minister, Lord Sainsbury, had donated over £11 million to the Labour Party. It is the Sainsbury supermarket family's Linbury Trust that provided financial support for the Chief Medical Officer's "independent" Working Group on "CFS/ME" and that since 1991 has so generously funded the "Wessely School" psychiatrists' research into "chronic fatigue". The Science Minister has responsibility for the Office of Science and Technology and for the chemical and biotech industries, as well as for all the Research Councils, including the Medical Research Council. The Office of Science and Technology monitors all Government funding of research grants and it controls official science policy. Crucially, it is "policy" that determines the research that Government permits to be funded. This was most tellingly confirmed by the Secretary of State for Health (answered by Yvette Cooper) in a written answer to a question asking about funding for research into the causes of, and cure for, ME (Hansard: 11 May 2000: 461W 462W). In her reply, Ms

Cooper stated "The Department funds research to support policy and the delivery of effective health practice in the National Health Service".

This seems to confirm the invincibly circuitous nature of Government strategy. However, even more disturbing information has just been released and was posted on Co-cure on 26th June 2004 at 19.06 (Co-cure NOT; ACT: [US]: WHO scientists will require clearance).

The notice states that the Bush administration has ordered that Government scientists must be approved by a senior political appointee before they can participate in meetings of the World Health Organisation. Officials at the WHO in Geneva say this could compromise the independence of international scientific deliberations. The request is the latest instance in which the Bush administration has been accused of allowing politics to intrude into the once-sacrosanct areas of scientific deliberation. This year, 60 prominent scientists accused the administration of "misrepresenting and suppressing scientific knowledge for political purposes". Republican Henry Waxman said "This new policy politicises the process of providing the expert advice of US scientists to the international community". The WHO is the United Nations agency dedicated to health. It traditionally insists on picking experts to sit on official scientific panels, but William Steiger, godson of President Bush's father (former President George HW Bush), stated in a letter declaring the new vetting policy that civil service and other regulations "require experts to serve as representatives of the US government at all times and advocate US Government policies".

Given that deliberations about the future classification of ME/CFS in the next revision of the WHO International Classification of Diseases are currently a hot topic amongst psychiatrists who have a particular interest in "CFS/ME", the UK ME/CFS community needs to be alert because as noted elsewhere, when the USA sneezes, the UK catches a cold.

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