

Financed research

Business buys science

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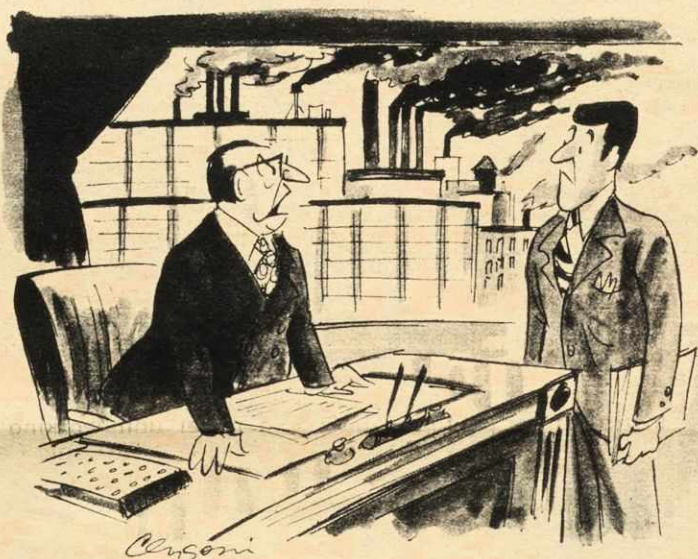
Scientific information is the backbone of regulations for toxic substances. If 'science' shows a substance to be safe then it will be used freely, even if it is a pesticide or food additive.

But what if scientific results can be bought, or influenced, by the companies that make or distribute the toxic products? Since governments

The influence of industry financing on research should never be underestimated—by far the greatest proportion of toxic substances research is funded by the industries concerned, with only a small input of government funds. For instance in 1972 alone, the asbestos industry spent \$8.5 million on research and development, much of which went to outside medical centres. Even seemingly independent university research or other research institutions work is commonly paid for by the industry involved. For example, the McGill Department of Epidemiology is



"Of course what we're doing is wrong, but that doesn't make it indefensible."



"I don't care how you do it, Rogers, just go out and find out something good about pollution!"

depend largely on industry tests to tell them what is safe, the public is in trouble. Civil servants' reliance on industry research was brought home to me by two interviews I did recently. The Ontario civil servant in charge of drinking water quality informed me that the Asbestos Information Centre sent him most of the material he had on asbestos. The Centre is funded entirely by the asbestos producers. A few weeks later I talked to the person responsible for road salting policies in the Ontario Ministry of Transport and Communications and asked him about the environmental effects of salt. His response was to refer me to a report prepared by the Salt Institute. Guess, who funds the Salt Institute?

It does not surprise people that studies funded by an industry come up with results that are favourable to that industry. But think of the implications: It means that the desired scientific results can be bought. Money pays for research—some scientists are corrupt and others are predisposed to the industry position and will therefore look for confirming evidence. These are the men that the industry will look for when letting contracts.

dependent for 2/3 of its funding on the Quebec Asbestos Manufacturers Association. McGill's research has been favourable to the asbestos industry. In particular, a study of 11,000 abestos

miners in Quebec done at McGill concluded that the overall mortality rate for asbestos workers was lower than that of the average Quebec population with the same age distribution. Because of the good name of McGill and the size of the study the report carried a lot of weight. However, using the same data it can easily be shown that the workers with the highest exposure to asbestos had five times the mortality rate of the workers with the lowest exposure—a very different conclusion indeed. A study done by Health P.A.C. found that of 33 studies sponsored by the asbestos industry that they examined, they all minimized or denied the danger, whereas all the non-industry studies emphasized how dangerous a substance it really is.

The economic stakes for the asbestos industry are high. Sweden is heading towards a total ban on asbestos while the European Common Market is discussing whether to phase in a ban; both moves are on health grounds alone. Not surprisingly, where there have been investigations on

other economically significant substances similar problems with scientific research have been uncovered. Dr. Samuel Epstein of the University of Illinois has collected several examples.

In 1976, twenty-four common pesticides, which had been considered relatively safe as residues in human food on the basis of extensive tests submitted by the manufacturers to the U.S. government, were re-evaluated. The new report found that with the possible exception of one pesticide all the data was so inadequate it was impossible to tell whether or not the pesticides were safe. Similarly, a review of seventeen industry studies on the cancer causing potential of DDT found that fourteen were so defective that no conclusions should have been drawn. Fraudulent manipulation of data has been established for drugs such as MER/29, Dornwall, Flexin and Panabula for which the companies involved were convicted. These examples are only the

tip of the iceberg, but still the Canadian and U.S. governments rely largely on industry studies for their regulations. In fact, the studies are used worldwide, since scientific knowledge is of international importance.

Not only are industry sponsored studies often suspect, but through sheer numbers they can drown out respectable independent findings. Fourteen poor studies on DDT, 33 industry sponsored asbestos studies—among these it is easy to miss or ignore one or two good studies.

The main lesson is that scientists are not neutral; what they study and what they find does depend on who pays for the work. New substances should be tested and the tests paid for by the industry that wants to manufacture them, but government should set the terms of the contacts and choose who will do the research. Last but not least, one truly independent study is worth a great many industry sponsored reports.

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