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Transparency at IARC

The appointment in mid-May of the next Director of the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) parallels that of the next Director-General of WHO, to be announced next week. IARC was formed in 1965 as part of WHO, is based in Lyon, France, and is most noted for its influential series of monographs on definite, probable, and possible carcinogens. IARC also does original research, especially on cancer epidemiology and laboratory carcinogenesis. Starting last September, *The Lancet* sought to create public discussion about the appointment of the next WHO Director-General (see pages 194 and 231), and some of the issues about that appointment also apply to the next IARC Director, especially about conflicts of interest, accountability, and transparency.

IARC relies on the expertise of its staff and external co-opted scientific advisers and, like all public bodies, must be seen to be free of bias, especially from pressure by industry given IARC's important role in pronouncing on the carcinogenic potential of substances in manufacturing, use, or consumption. There is no escaping the fact that expert advisers often have links with industry, either through funding of their research or in previous employment. But there have been instances in which IARC may have come under undue influences, especially commercial ones.

The January, 2003, edition of *The Lancet Oncology* reports accusations of industry influence on IARC, especially when carcinogens are downgraded to a lower category of risk, and the difficulties faced by non-industry observers in attending IARC meetings. Paul Kleihues and Gro Harlem Brundtland, the outgoing heads of IARC and WHO, respectively, denied any such influence. Brundtland told *The Lancet Oncology* that she had commissioned a report which showed that financial disclosure is working properly at IARC. But, for full credibility, the report should be available publicly.

Lorenzo Tomatis was IARC's Director from 1982 to 1993. Last year, in the *International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health*, he summarised IARC's monograph programme. Tomatis describes political naivety when scientific values clashed with other influences, especially pressure from industry, and how the monograph

programme had to learn to resist pressure. The monographs use only peer-reviewed and published data, yet, according to Tomatis, industry often tried to slip in their unpublished data on the condition that such data remained confidential. In the same journal, also last year, James Huff, chief of an earlier monograph programme, reported that in volumes 62–79 nearly a third of about 250 monograph authors were “aligned” to industry, as were eight of 19 chairpersons or vice-chairpersons.

How publicly funded organisations such as WHO, and thus IARC, should not operate was highlighted last week by the leaking of a report, commissioned and paid for by WHO, to a health journalist. As done for passive smoking by the tobacco industry, this report (according to *The Guardian*, Jan 9), highlights infiltration of, and pressure against, WHO by scientists in the pay of or sympathetic to the food industry. WHO responded that the report is really about the tobacco industry. Several tobacco companies are allied to food industries commercially, and both have major interests in safety and regulation of their products. In response to the newspaper article, Derek Yach, Executive Director for non-communicable disease at WHO, welcomed “the increasingly open and transparent debate on the issue of diet and its effect on the growing burden of chronic disease”, although the report's author told *The Lancet* that he would not release the report without WHO's permission.

It only needs the perception, let alone the reality, of financial conflicts and commercial pressures to destroy the credibility of important organisations such as IARC and its parent, WHO. Keeping reports confidential, reports that are funded by public monies, is not the way to maintain or restore credibility and only fuels sceptics' suspicions. The new IARC Director could make a good start by opting for full public transparency and access by non-industry third parties. A first step should be to launch an independent external audit into IARC—that would allay any suspicion that discredited and long-established practices are being eliminated under a new regime.

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