

Is industry influencing IARC to downgrade carcinogens?

In February 2002, Barry Castleman, an environmental consultant from Baltimore, MD, USA sent Gro Harlem Brundtland, Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO), a letter cosigned by 30 prominent scientists that raised concerns about inappropriate corporate influence in the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC)—WHO's dedicated cancer research arm. The cosignatories alleged that the IARC had downgraded the carcinogen classification of several harmful substances, despite bioassay evidence to the contrary, as a result of corporate pressure. The signatories also claim that some of the scientists invited to evaluate carcinogens came from the companies that were producing them, and that in the case of one particular compound, voting may have been influenced by non-voting 'observers' who managed to bring about a second ballot.

Jennifer Sass, (Natural Resources Defense Council, New York, USA) says that despite the health implications of the allegations, the letter received no response from WHO. Describing a recent incident at an IARC meeting in October 2002, she says that a representative of the American Water Works Association was asked to review by-products of water disinfection. Sass explains: "This representative was charged with preparing a review of the regulatory standards for these chemicals—the very regulatory standards that he works against!"

There have been further suggestions that the IARC not only invites industry representatives to these meetings, but also pays their expenses. Sass stresses: "Industry representatives should not be voting, should not be preparing the scientific documents, and should definitely not be paid by IARC."

Concerns about the objectivity of the IARC are not new. "I encountered the problem when I asked to be an observer at the IARC meeting on saccharin", says Michael Jacobson, Center for Science in the Public Interest, Washington DC, USA. "My request was denied with the explanation that the small number of available slots were

already filled with government and industry representatives." When the names of the committee members were eventually disclosed, Jacobson was shocked to discover that numerous industry employees and consultants had attended. "One member had conducted a good deal of industry-sponsored research designed to exonerate saccharin", he says. "I complained to Brundtland, but never received a response."

Castleman believes, however, that adherence to existing WHO policies would be enough to address the IARC's problems. A set of disclosure-of-interest guidelines were adopted by WHO in 2000, following revelations during a US

"This assertion is not borne out by the facts", he says. "The number [of people] from industry in any meeting has never been more than one or two out of usually 25, and they are never appointed as chairs of subgroups or of the meeting as a whole. The assertion that a very limited number of such scientists can influence [a large] body of experienced, independently minded experts scarcely merits comment." The letter also strongly denies a trend towards carcinogen downgrading, adding that out of 200 evaluations in the past 5 years, only 13 chemicals have been downgraded and that 13 others have actually have been upgraded.

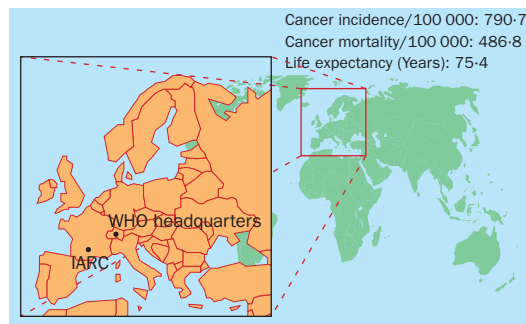
Kleihues says that IARC does not have a policy of excluding those who have links with industry since the selection criteria is expertise. He explains that inviting industry representatives is important because "industry is increasingly taking a major role in funding toxicological and epidemiological studies and government regulatory bodies do not generally repeat these studies".

Brundtland finally spoke on the matter when approached by *TLO*. She points out that the industry representatives mentioned in the letter did not participate in decision making. However, as Castleman and his cosignatories state, "inappropriate influence" may take numerous forms and may not be apparent when votes are cast.

Brundtland insists she is concerned about conflicts of interest and even went as far as to commission a consultant to investigate how the disclosure procedure was being used. With respect to the IARC, the consultant reported that the policy had been properly used by IARC since October 2001.

"WHO is continuously working to increase diversity in the panels of experts attending WHO meetings," Brundtland told *TLO*. "As a consequence of the review by the consultant, WHO shall be issuing some revisions to improve the process for handling the declaration of interests by experts."

Adrian Burton



The IARC is WHO's dedicated cancer-research organisation.

law suit involving the tobacco industry's attempts to manipulate WHO. According to Castleman, financial conflicts of interest "are listed on the disclosure forms that scientists appointed to WHO expert panels are required to fill out". He suggests that these disclosure forms be made publicly available for scrutiny.

Paul Kleihues, Director of the IARC, has responded to Castleman's allegations in a letter made available to *TLO*. "You imply in your letter that these [disclosure-of-interest] guidelines are not followed by IARC", the letter begins. "This is simply not the case and a conflict of interest form is completed by all participants in Monograph Meetings...any actual or potential conflicts of interest are made known to the participants in the meeting and those with significant conflicts do not participate in the final evaluation." Kleihues also denies that decisions may have been inappropriately influenced: