



Will IARC election help to change “name security” policy ?

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC; France) is looking for a new Director. And on May 15–16, the Governing Council will make its choice. However, despite the high public profile of this office, only those involved in voting are allowed to know the candidates names.

Anyone can apply for the post of IARC Director, although it is common for WHO member states to nominate their own candidates. A search committee of five delegates from the 15 participating states of the IARC, two members of the IARC Scientific Council, and one WHO representative, then produces a shortlist of applicants. This list is passed to the Governing Council of the IARC whose delegates—one from each participating state—vote in the election alongside the WHO Director General.

“The Search Committee makes a recommendation to the Governing Council in private”, says Paul Kleihues, current IARC Director. “This recommendation is not communicated to anyone in the Agency or outside.” He explains that IARC’s aim is to prevent the nominees being involved in a large-scale political debate in the run-up to the elections. When questioned about whether there were plans for this policy to change he comments: “This is at least our stance at this time.”

Similar security surrounds the names of Monograph Working Group members (committees that decide the carcinogen status of chemical products). Although members’ names and affiliations are published in the *Monograph Volumes*, this is done only after their work is finished. Concern has been expressed over the possibility of industry influence on these groups, with claims made that some members could have had industry-linked agendas. But the very reason for keeping these names secret is to protect the process from external influence, explains Kleihues. “You

must consider that anyone invited to be a member of the working group is open to influence before a meeting actually starts. For example, when we had the big tobacco meeting last year, we kept this list absolutely secret.” If we had published the members’ names, they could have been exposed to anything, he adds. “Similarly, if we were to publish the names of the Monograph Working Group



The IARC headquarters in Lyon, France.

Furthermore, the secrecy policy does not seem to work. It took *The Lancet Oncology* under 24 hours to acquire a copy of a letter, dated March 4, sent by the WHO to the Swedish Minister of Health and Social Affairs, informing of the candidates to be considered at the next session of the IARC Governing Council on May 15–16, 2003. If *The Lancet Oncology* can get hold of such information, it is safe to assume that industry representatives would accomplish it with equal ease, so it is likely that those with vested interests in the outcome of the election will have already seen the list of candidates, who are thus exposed to lobbying by industry-linked third parties.

Many believe that industry coercion would be more difficult to hide if elections were conducted under public scrutiny. Barry Castleman, an environmental consultant from Baltimore remarks, “continuing secrecy at the WHO—withholding its recent consultancy report on IARC and refusal to adopt a policy of publicly releasing outside experts’ disclosure forms—are a continuing and unnecessary threat to international public health”.

The World Health Organization, IARC’s parent agency, was accused of a similar closed-door approach during electoral procedures for its Director General. But this secrecy became the target of a successful and widely praised campaign by *The Lancet* to publicise the nominees and make the elections more open.

A recent editorial in the *Lancet* states: “It only needs the perception, let alone the reality, of financial conflicts and commercial pressures to destroy the credibility of important organisations like the IARC and the WHO” (*Lancet* 2003: 361: 189). Much of this perception could be swept aside if the new director of the IARC were to adopt a policy of greater transparency.

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