

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Tuesday, June 11, 2002

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CSPI Calls for Prevention and Disclosure of Conflicts of Interest in Bioethics

Many bioethicists have financial ties to the companies whose ethics they evaluate, presenting something of an ethics problem for a profession charged with scrutinizing controversial practices in science and medicine, according to the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI). Today CSPI urged more than 125 bioethics organizations and journals to address the problem of conflicts of interest by disclosing consulting, advisory, and funding arrangements bioethicists have with biotechnology, pharmaceutical, chemical, and other companies.

“This is a classic case of the fox guarding the henhouse,” CSPI executive director Michael F. Jacobson said. “I fear that professional ethicists may lose sight of right and wrong as they try to make their opinions more palatable to corporate sponsors.”

CSPI notes that:

- * The University of Pennsylvania Center for Bioethics is developing a code of ethics for the agricultural biotechnology industry. The effort is funded by Dow, DuPont, and Monsanto, and industry officials serve on the committee developing the code.
- * The University of Kansas’ Midwest Bioethics Center has created a Research Integrity Project — with \$587,870 from the Aventis Pharmaceutical Foundation.
- * Biomedical companies have given "at least \$2 million to bioethics centers and offered lucrative contracts to academic researchers," according to U.S. News and World Report.
- * The American Medical Association’s Council on Ethics and Judicial Affairs has a program to educate doctors about the ethics of industry gift-giving. The program is sponsored by, among others, Eli Lilly, Merck, Pfizer, AstraZeneca, Bayer, and Procter and Gamble, and company representatives sit on the working group.

CSPI found that only one bioethics organization (the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for Bioethics), out of 89 surveyed, has on its web site a policy on external funding and conflicts of interest. Of 53 bioethics journals, only two have published requirements for disclosing conflicts of

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interest to the journal and its readers.

“The problem with ethics consultants is that they look like watchdogs but can be used like showdogs,” Carl Elliott, a bioethicist at the University of Minnesota said. “No matter how outrageous a corporate policy, no matter how troubling a headline in the morning paper, it will be softened by the knowledge that the corporation in question has consulted with a team of ethics experts.”

The letters, from Virginia A. Sharpe, Ph.D., director of CSPI’s Integrity in Science Project, urge bioethicists to bring the same degree of scrutiny to their own conflicts of interest as they have to those of doctors and clinical researchers.

“When members of the public hear someone speak as an ethicist they assume that the person doing the talking is beyond reproach,” says Sharpe, herself a bioethicist and former Deputy Director of the Hastings Center. “Bioethicists and bioethics institutions have not been as diligent as they should have been in ensuring that financial ties to industry do not inappropriately influence their work.”

CSPI’s letter to bioethics journals urges them to require disclosure of all relevant financial and other potentially biasing ties of authors and to reject those papers whose objectivity is compromised by conflicts of interest. The letter to bioethics organizations calls for them to develop and make publicly available strong policies to prevent conflicts of interest due to corporate funding and other influences, to define the types of affiliation that are unacceptable, and to establish procedures for managing unavoidable conflicts.

The CSPI initiative is intended to sensitize bioethicists and the public to the pitfalls of corporate-ethicist partnerships and to establish guidelines on the ethics of bioethics. CSPI accepts no corporate or government funds. Information about industry-sponsored science can be found at www.integrityinscience.org.

NOTE: CSPI’s letters can be found at <http://www.cspinet.org/integrity/actions.html>

The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) is a non-profit consumer advocacy organization conducting programs in nutrition, alcohol, food safety, and scientific integrity. It is supported by foundation grants and more than 800,000 members in the United States and Canada.