June 7, 2002

Dear Colleague:

Bioethicists and others outside the field have begun to take note of the ways in which industry affiliations may create potentially biasing conflicts of interest for bioethics centers and individual bioethicists. Carl Elliot’s provocative piece “Pharma Buys a Conscience” in the American Prospect last year put bioethicists on notice about the need for scrutiny of conflicts of interest in our own discipline. Members of the field have recently proposed guidelines governing private-sector bioethics consultation, and bioethics centers have begun to articulate institutional conflict-of-interest policies around external funding. In general, however, bioethics is behind the curve on these issues. Bioethics centers often do not disclose their funding sources in a way that is accessible to the public and bioethicists do not routinely disclose conflicts of interest or commitment when they speak at conferences or to the press. Further, centers and programs often do not have policies on external funding and conflicts of interest.

I write to you today to urge your bioethics center to develop and make publicly available a strong conflict-of-interest policy for the center and its faculty or professional staff. The policy should include clear statements on external funding and consultancy; the types of affiliation that are unacceptable; and procedures for conflict-of-interest management. In addition, I urge you to make a full public disclosure on your website and in any annual statement of your center’s restricted and unrestricted funding sources and other potentially biasing relationships that bear on the intellectual work conducted. The policy should also require the same transparency of your faculty or professional staff in their public presentations, media interviews, and classes.

Although many bioethics organizations are affiliated with a parent institution a center’s own policy should not simply refer to the parent institution’s policy of industry funding - which typically do not provide adequate public disclosure - but should articulate a policy that specifically addresses conflicts of interest in bioethics. Regarding collaborative projects, one of the conditions of collaboration should be agreement on and public disclosure of the governing conflict of interest policy.
Background

I have been working in the field of bioethics for fifteen years and, until recently, was Deputy Director of the Hastings Center. Like many in our field, I have become increasingly concerned about conflicts of interest resulting from industry-sponsored scientific research and, more broadly, the commercialization of medicine and science. As bioethics has become a more established discipline contributing to the public discourse about the responsible conduct of science and use of technology, bioethicists too are increasingly engaged in consulting and advisory arrangements with biotechnology, pharmaceutical, chemical, and other companies. Bioethics centers receive funding from those companies, and bioethicists serve on corporate boards, conduct research under the auspices of industry trade associations, and receive honoraria for speaking at industry-sponsored events.

These issues recently prompted me to take on the directorship of the Integrity in Science Project at the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI). (See www.integrityinscience.org) The aims of the project are to raise awareness among policy makers, institutional leaders, and the public about the role of corporations in scientific research and oversight; to advocate for public disclosure of funding sources by individuals, governmental and non-governmental organizations that conduct, regulate, or provide oversight of scientific investigation or promote specific scientific findings; and to investigate conflicts of interest and other potentially destructive influences of industry-sponsored science. CSPI is funded by the 800,000 subscribers to the Nutrition Action Healthletter and by foundation grants. CSPI accepts no corporate or government funding.

As you know, conflicts of interest in scientific research and oversight have received considerable attention in recent years. Revelations of pharmaceutical company ghostwriting, gifts and other inducements to influence prescribing practices, research findings skewed toward a funder’s interests, institutional retribution against scientists who have been critical of the products of a corporate funder, and equity ownership by investigators and their institutions in drugs whose effectiveness they are studying have all eroded trust in the research enterprise.

In response, the General Accounting Office has investigated conflicts of interest in environmental regulation and human-subjects-research protection; the American Association of Universities issued an October 2001 report on research accountability; and the American Association of Medical Colleges began a conflict-of-interest initiative that resulted in a December 2001 report on individual financial interests and will produce a report on institutional conflicts of interest. Proposed legislation to strengthen human research protection includes significant conflict-of-interest provisions. In the area of scientific publication, a number of biomedical journals have taken the lead in establishing stronger conflict-of-interest policies. In February of this year, CSPI urged similar steps in science journals generally (See Van Kolfschooten, F. “Can you believe what
you read?” Nature 2002;416:360-63, enclosed). Within the academy, there is a growing call for public conversation about the relationship between industry funding, the value of free inquiry, and the intellectual commons.

The effectiveness of bioethics in contributing to the public discourse on these and other matters depends on the integrity of our work and public confidence in our work process. Transparency through public disclosure of conflicts of interest and clarity in our policies and practices regarding potential bias are fundamental aspects of that effort.

I appreciate your consideration of these matters and look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Virginia Ashby Sharpe, Ph.D.

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