

OT: medical journals become increasingly irrelevant

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Monday, November 29, 2004 commentary:

Scientific medical journals like JAMA fail basic credibility standards; medical journals become increasingly irrelevant

The Journal of the American Medical Association --- JAMA --- and other scientific medical journals have been caught red-handed by the Center for Science in the Public Interest for failing to disclose the financial relationships between study authors and companies that might benefit from such studies. For example, one author of a study published in JAMA that conducted research on kidney disease did not disclose that he is a consultant paid by Merck, Bristol-Meyers, Squibb, GlaxoSmithKline, and Pfizer, all of which have products that could be marketed to the public based on the information presented in the study.

Here's how the con works: the study author receives cash from these pharmaceutical companies, gets his study published in a prestigious scientific journal, and then the drug companies can state that they are basing the marketing of their product on published, peer-reviewed scientific facts. The hidden fact in all of this, of course, is that the author of the study is on the payroll of these companies and didn't even bother to disclose that relationship to the journal. It's good old fashioned corruption... but with the stamp of approval from so-called "modern science."

It isn't just this one study, either --- a review of JAMA articles by the CSPI revealed that 11.3% of the articles reviewed had non-disclosed conflicts of interest. For a journal that claims to be presenting scientific truth in a non-biased way that is independent of pharmaceutical company influence, that's an alarmingly high number. And, of course, it's one of the reasons why these scientific journals are increasingly considered to be lacking in scientific credibility today. A number of journals were caught in the same study, revealing that this failure to disclose conflicts of interest is not merely something that happens at the American Medical Association, but

something that is widespread in the conventional medical community.

None of this comes as a surprise to me, since I've been one of the most outspoken critics of scientific journals for many years. Too many of these journals are masquerading as stewards of good science — they pretend to show articles that are well-researched, that are authored by people who have no financial interest in their publication, and that have been put through a rigorous quality control process known as peer review. But in fact what you often find in these journals is the exclusion of articles that talk about alternative therapies or pioneering therapies that compete with pharmaceutical profits. You also find a closed network of old school, closed-minded, conventional researchers and medical doctors who primarily use the journals to protect their own belief systems by only allowing the publication of articles that agree with their narrow beliefs. In that regard, it's more like a dogma or a religion than a scientific community.

Often, the so-called scientific truth presented by these journals is really just a relative truth that has been invented by a circle of influential doctors, researchers and journal editors who define scientific truth by choosing what to publish (and what to ignore). So, it is a rather obvious case of circular reasoning on their side. In other words, to put it more plainly, it's true if they say it is, and if they reject a paper, then it's not true. Scientific fact is whatever they tell you it should be.

But that philosophy stands at odds with true science. True science is based on a demonstrated curiosity about the way nature and the universe works. A true scientist would look at the relationships between the consumption of water and human health and they might ask, "What is the role of water in the human body?" Or they might look at plants and observe the miraculous nature of how plants are tiny pharmaceutical factories that convert vitamins and minerals, sunlight, and carbon dioxide into powerful medicinal compounds that can enhance human health. True scientists would look at the nature of relationships and how people who have more friends and engage in more social activities tend to live healthier, longer lives than those who don't. Those are the kinds of activities that true scientists pursue, because they are curious about the way the world works and how human beings can take advantage of natural laws in order to enhance their health and quality of life.

But those aren't the kinds of topics that these so-called conventional medical scientists pursue. They pursue topics like, "How do we cure cancer with nanotechnology?" or "How do we override the body's immune system and interfere with it using toxic chemicals that poison the body?" They might say, "How do we take this patented drug that nobody else can legally sell, and market it to the entire world by inventing a disease, such as social anxiety disorder, and then sell the drug at monopoly prices to people while confiscating imported generic versions of that drug from another country?" Those are the kinds of activities

that many of today's conventional scientists, doctors and pharmaceutical executives pursue, and it's all one big school of people who are essentially serving their own interests while invoking — in a blasphemous way — so-called "science."

The bottom line to all of this is that the game is up — these journals are starting to be exposed for their deceit and their lack of open-mindedness, as well as their failure to disclose the financial ties between authors and pharmaceutical companies that benefit from the publication of authors' studies.

And by the way, I almost forgot to mention that most of these scientific journals are, in fact, supported by advertising funds from pharmaceutical companies. So, you have a direct financial link from pharmaceutical companies to these journals, such as the Journal of the American Medical Association, and then you have the journals either neglecting, or even perhaps suppressing the disclosure of financial ties between authors of articles they publish and the very same pharmaceutical companies that are writing checks to the journals. I'm sure the American Medical Association realizes that publishing JAMA is a highly profitable business activity. It generates a lot of money, and one has to wonder about the priority of that money when you're standing in front of the pharmaceutical executive who's handing you a check for \$100,000 or \$1,000,000 (or some amount that's even larger).

Personally, I don't trust any scientific publication that survives based on advertising revenues from pharmaceutical companies. The conflict of interest is so obvious as to be utterly ridiculous — the journals need to keep their financial lifelines alive, and that means supporting pharmaceutical companies that keep on sending them checks. In that kind of system, there is no such thing as credibility. You can't have an unbiased publication of any kind if you're dependent on advertising revenues paid directly to you by the very same companies you're supposed to be covering in the editorial content. These medical journals are, effectively, bought out by the financial interests of Big Pharma.

And, by the way, the whole concept of a medical journal is increasingly irrelevant these days anyway. Thanks to the internet and the launching of an open-source medical journal endeavor, we all have the capacity to participate in open databases of clinical studies. We don't need to be reading niche journals that are financed by pharmaceutical companies and still charge readers hundreds or thousands of dollars a year for access to their articles. What we need in this country is open, public access to all of the trials and studies that are being conducted, and we need a more open-minded, web-based journal system, where pioneering researchers and those who are engaged in activities outside conventional medicine can get solid, scientific work published, regardless of whether it threatens the profits of drug companies.

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