

IS RTP
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*The International Society of
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www.ISRTP.org

President's Corner

There's always something interesting happening in Washington, DC. Frequently, a Congressional investigation is involved, and often, Congress appears to be accusing others of wielding power, money, and influence. Recently, IS RTP made minor headlines by being mentioned in a Congressional investigation. In an April 2, 2008 letter to the American Chemistry Council, Congressman Dingell, Chairman of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, and Congressman Stupak, Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, requested information on the trade association's financial relationships with IS RTP and its journal, *Regulatory Toxicology and Pharmacology*. The subcommittee seems to think it is following a money trail in hot pursuit of corruption. Richard Wiles of the Environmental Working Group is reported to have said of the Dingell/Stupak investigation: "This is a landmark investigation. For the first time the public will find out exactly how the chemical industry uses their influence to corrupt government science at the expense of public health." Wiles did not mention, and the Congressional subcommittee is unlikely to ask about a comparison between the scant funding received by IS RTP over the years versus the money trail that may have prompted the investigation itself. It is curious that several organizations with decidedly anti-industry agendas have recently received substantial amounts of money to

conduct similar "investigations." In 2000, the Beldon Fund awarded \$210,000 to the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) "To identify and publicize the conflicts of interest of scientists and doctors who sit on influential advisory panels of the National Academy of Sciences, federal agencies and congressional committees..."; \$300,000 to the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) "...to uncover hidden conflicts of interest on EPA advisory boards, and other activities related to conflicts of interest...", and; \$300,000 to the Public Education Center (PEC) "To ferret out conflicts of interest of scientists and other experts who serve on influential scientific advisory panels for federal agencies, congressional committees, research institutes and other bodies that make decisions about public health and the environment." These awards were followed in 2003 with \$200,000, \$100,000, and \$150,000, respectively; in 2004 with \$100,000 to CSPI; in 2005 with \$200,000 to NRDC and \$100,000 to CSPI; and in 2006 with \$150,000 to CSPI and \$250,000 to NRDC, all to continue these activities. The fruits of these grants, currently totaling more than 2 million dollars, include a 2002 letter from CSPI to Elsevier, publisher of *Regulatory Toxicology and Pharmacology*, containing false accusations regarding the peer-review policies of the journal and its editorial board. If it is true that the Beldon Fund is required to disperse the remainder of its endowment within the next year -- a sum more than \$30 million -- we may expect even more inaccurate fodder to be brought before the Congressional investigation.

Of course, one should not be surprised that Congress takes interest in *ad hominem* attacks. Theirs is, after all, the business of politics, wherein who told what to whom, who paid what to whom, and who stood to gain from it are daily fare. Lacking objective means to evaluate information in the political arena, politics may be left with only intrigue and innuendo to ground their deliberations. Regardless of what money trail the Congressional investigation follows, one thing is unfortunately

certain: their process will improve nothing, but may do irreparable damage to the process of science itself.

The reason is quite simple: science has an objective means of evaluating information, but it has nothing to do with who got the money and why. Rather, it has all to do with what data were generated and how those data were interpreted. The process of science removes the scientist, with his numerous biases and conflicts of interest, as far as humanely possible from the process of data generation and interpretation. In contrast, the Congressional investigation puts the scientist front and center. Not only does their investigation misunderstand the proper workings of science, it simplistically ignores the myriad of influences other than money that could corrupt the scientific process, and how science can be validated regardless of the moral and ethical purity of scientists.

Gaining recognition, advancing one's own theories and ideologies, securing support for one's own research program, and pressure to publish (especially in academia) are just a few motivators often more persuasive to individual scientists than personal financial gain. These powerful lures have led some scientists to not only skew interpretations but to publish outright fraud. Memorable examples include the 1996 Science publication from the Guillette / McLachlan research team that reported 1,100-fold estrogenic synergy from pesticides, and the more recent 2004/2005 Science publications of Woo Suk Hwang and coworkers claiming development of human embryonic stem cell lines that matched patient DNA.

Bias and conflict of interest have always been recognized as potential corruptors of science, but the solution is not to investigate scientists and money trails; it is to scrutinize data and the algorithms used to interpret

them. If Congress is serious about protecting science, they could do it better by understanding and honoring the time-tested precepts of science rather than by subverting those precepts. They would do well to promote complete transparency of experimental data and methods of analysis and interpretation, regardless of the source of funding or outcome of the research. And, they might renew reliance on the timeless criteria for the validation of scientific evidence, based on authentication of what is measured, certification of measurement accuracy and precision, control of interfering variables that may confound measurements, and the consistent replication of results by different investigators.

Promoting thorough and objective scrutiny of the science according to clear validation criteria would do more to thwart corruption in science than any inquisition into the vague and varied motivations of scientists ever could. Think about it... politicians have been investigating one another for decades, and with what improvement? But perhaps this is too much to ask, for the adoption of clear and incontrovertibly honest principles would do away with most of the disputes about what constitutes good science and junk science. It would also much reduce the reasons (and funding) for partisan advocacy bent on *ad hominem* arguments, while forcing politicians to focus on issues of merit. Stay tuned...

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