Over the past few months there have been a number of well publicized controversies that have highlighted the impact of industry funding on the nature and tone research results. There is, for example, mounting evidence that involvement with industry sponsors creates a bias toward the publication of positive results.¹ The impact of these studies has been punctuated by headline grabbing stories about safety issues with the popular drugs Paxil and Vioxx, and the possible suppression of negative results.

To date, however, there has been little discussion about the impact of research funding on the integrity of ethical, legal and social issues (ELSI) research. Unlike some areas of biomedical investigation, ELSI research, which includes a wide range of disciplines, rarely receives significant funds directly from industry sponsors. However, increasingly, the government funding agencies that support biomedical ELSI work have, rightly or not, embraced an explicit commercialization agenda. For example, the enabling legislation of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), Canada’s primary public funder of biomedical research, states that the goals of the CIHR are to “encourag[e] innovation, facilitat[e] the commercialization of health research in Canada and promot[e] economic development through health research in Canada.”² Genome Canada, a publicly funded national research program, requires all researchers to obtain matching funds, which will often come from the private sector, on a dollar for dollar basis.³

There are undeniable benefits to building close ties between academic researchers and industry. Commercial partners increase available research funds, may contribute to broader economic growth and provide the needed infrastructure to develop and disseminate new technologies. But these ties also come with a cost. Though the public clearly trusts academic researchers, that trust can be quickly lost. And there is evidence that involvement with industry is one of the surest ways to lose public trust.⁴ One study, for example, found that most people “rest their assessment of credibility on the degree to which the person or institution is perceived to be at arm’s length and independent of controlling and/or funding influencers. The source of the funding seems to be the critical test.”⁵

Ideally, all researchers should have access to funds that are removed from an economic agenda. However, in a world where the biomedical research environment is becoming increasingly commercialized, the role of the independent ELSI scholar seems particularly important. ELSI work can provide an ongoing critical analysis of the biomedical research environment, thus helping to build public trust by ensuring that research is done in an ethically appropriate manner. ELSI researchers often serve on policy bodies and provide expert advice to government on socially contentious issues, such as stem cell research, the use of placebo controlled trials and human gene patents.⁶ In these controversial areas, the mere perception of bias may compromise the

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integrity and credibility of both the policy making process and the associated ELSI research.

My research is supported by grants from Genome Canada and the National Centres of Excellence programs (e.g., the Stem Cell Network). Both programs have been wonderfully successful at funding large scale interdisciplinary projects. They provide unique opportunities for ELSI scholars and students to work closely with scientists, thus helping to ensure that ELSI research is informed by science and that scientists are sensitive to ELSI issues. In addition, these research bodies, as with the CIHR, have been tremendously supportive of ELSI work, funding large peer reviewed research projects, public engagement initiatives and national conferences and workshops.

However, the mere association with funding entities that have a mandate to facilitate the commercialization of research can produce a perception of bias that might diminish the perceived impartiality of even high quality ELSI work. This situation creates an “ELSI research” paradox.

Third, researchers should not be required to always justify work in the context of economic benefit. Indeed, there has been a good deal of Canadian ELSI research that has highlighted the social concerns associated with the commercialization process. Though such work has clear social benefit, as demonstrated by the Vioxx and Paxil controversies, its direct commercial utility is less obvious.

Fourth, it is essential that the Canadian government continue to fund basic research in all areas of biomedical investigation.

There seems little doubt that the research community will have an ever increasing role to play in the Canadian society. Many emerging areas of research – including nanotechnology, stem cell research and human genetics – have the potential to create new health benefits and economic opportunities. However, they also create innumerable ethical, legal and social challenges. All research associated with commercially promising areas should not have to be caught in the glare of market potential. Indeed, one way to help address the social issues inevitably associated with academic/industry partnerships is to ensure that clinicians, policy makers and the public can rely upon a critical analysis by truly independent academic researchers.

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Upcoming Events

“The Public’s Health and the Law in the 21st Century”
American Society of Law, Medicine and Ethics
June 13 - 15, 2005 Atlanta, Georgia

“First International Interdisciplinary Conference On Emergencies”
IICE 2005 Emergency Care Continuum
June 26 - 30, 2005 Montreal, Quebec

“Mapping the Future of Public Health: People, Places and Policies”
Canadian Public Health Association 96th Annual Conference
September 18 - 21, 2005 Ottawa, Ontario

“The 1st World Conference on Public Health Law & Ethics”
August 17-21, 2005, Seoul, Korea

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