

November 17, 2009

Francis S. Collins, MD, PhD  
Director  
National Institutes of Health  
9000 Rockville Pike  
Bethesda, MD 20892

Dear Dr. Collins,

We are writing to ask NIH to fund studies on medical ethics, conflicts of interest in medicine and research, and prescribing behavior. NIH funds a substantial portion of the generation and dissemination of evidence, but the uptake of that evidence and its translation into clinical practice is strongly affected by the complex web of relationships that exists among industry, academicians, medical educators and clinicians.

There is growing evidence that each strand of this web is compromised by ethical lapses and financial conflicts of interest. The recent disclosure of ghostwritten articles, physician payoffs, and the use of academic opinion leaders to increase markets for FDA-regulated products indicate that ethical lapses may permeate biomedical research. A PLoS Medicine editorial in September called ghostwriting “The dirty little secret of medical publishing” and notes “the systematic manipulation and abuse of scholarly publishing by the pharmaceutical industry and its commercial partners in their attempt to influence the health care decisions of physicians and the general public.”<sup>1</sup> An October 1 editorial in the Boston Globe called for a ban on industry speaker fees to physicians.<sup>2</sup> Last month, a commentary in JAMA called for physicians to pay for continuing medical education (CME),<sup>3</sup> citing a recent Institute of Medicine report<sup>4</sup> that criticized physicians’ reliance on industry-funded education.

A stated goal of the NIH is to “exemplify and promote the highest level of scientific integrity, public accountability, and social responsibility in the conduct of science.” Could the muted effect that large, definitive NIH studies, including the WHI, ALLHAT, and CATIE, have had on clinical practice be due to commercial influences? To what extent have ghostwritten articles corrupted the medical and scientific literature? The extent to which industry influences the interpretation of science is unknown.

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<sup>1</sup> Ghostwriting: The Dirty Little Secret of Medical Publishing That Just Got Bigger. PLoS Medicine, September 8, 2009. <http://www.plosmedicine.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pmed.1000156>

<sup>2</sup> Keep Doctors Independent; Ban Fees From Drug Makers. Boston Globe, October 1, 2009. [http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial\\_opinion/editorials/articles/2009/10/01/keep\\_doctors\\_independent\\_ban\\_fees\\_from\\_drug\\_makers/](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/editorials/articles/2009/10/01/keep_doctors_independent_ban_fees_from_drug_makers/)

<sup>3</sup> Campbell EG, Rosenthal M. Reform of Continuing Medical Education: Investments in Physician Human Capital. JAMA. 2009;302(16):1807-1808. <http://jama.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/full/302/16/1807?home>

<sup>4</sup> Institute of Medicine. Conflict of Interest in Medical Research, Education, and Practice. Washington, DC: National Academies Press; April 28, 2009. <http://www.iom.edu/CMS/3740/47464/65721.aspx>

Dr. Elias Zerhouni, in the September 17<sup>th</sup> issue of Nature, commenting on Senator Grassley's investigation of academic medical centers, said "People flouted the rules, didn't disclose, and did it for years on end, repeatedly."<sup>5</sup>

In your role as the director of "the steward of medical and behavioral research for the Nation," we ask that you acknowledge the research gap on the effect of conflicts of interest and commercial influence on medical decisionmaking and set in motion a process that leads to recognition of the importance of funding studies on research ethics, the beliefs and behaviors of researchers and clinicians, and the effects of industry-academic relationships on the generation and dissemination of medical knowledge.

Between bench and bedside lies a path treacherous with ethical quandaries. NIH is the best place to launch and support a scientifically rigorous inquiry into the state of research ethics, industry-academic relationships, and the effect of these relationships on human health. There is currently no identifiable mechanism through which NIH would fund this research.

Your leadership regarding the importance of this issue as one the NIH needs to direct resources towards is essential. We hope to discuss these issues in a face-to-face meeting.

Sincerely,

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<sup>5</sup> Wadman M. The Senator's sleuth. Nature. 2009 Sept;461(17):330-4.

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