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A pioneer in menopause research, Dr. Utian founded the world's first menopause clinic in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1966 and established the Cleveland Menopause Clinic in 1983.

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## Integrity of Scientific Clinical Publications and Media Reporting—Credible Information or Imaginative Marketing?

In this new century it is virtually impossible to avoid being a cynic or a total doubter. The media feed us daily avalanches of mixed messages: bad news, cautions, warnings, exposures of “evil doers,” and unbelievable promises of technological advances or medical breakthroughs. We hear stories of greedy and conniving CEOs, disgraced politicians, fallen priests, a pharmaceutical industry force-feeding products via direct-to-consumer advertisements and a rampant health profession placing profits ahead of patient care.

Tuesdays and Wednesdays are the “medical nights” for the major networks and cable news channels, as they frantically compete to be first to end the reporting embargo of leading clinical journals such as the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* and *The New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM)*. Producers and reporters develop their own angle on a medical issue, and they clone or distort much of the medical news long before this information reaches the health professionals themselves. When we eventually gain access to these articles, as well as the soon-to-follow “reviews,” “digested abstracts,” “clinical guidelines” and the like, we invariably seem to find ourselves drawn into a partisan battle between the data's believers and disbelievers.

Advances in modern medicine depend largely on randomized placebo-controlled clinical studies, the so-called “gold standard” of evidence-based medicine. At question does not appear to be the general validity of the data from these trials, another major issue I have previously addressed.<sup>1</sup> Rather, the concern is the “spin” placed on the data. Many of our clinical journals are filled with reports of such studies, most of which are pharmaceutical industry-sponsored. Indeed, the contemporary clinical researcher finds it virtually impossible to meet the stringent demands of current drug evaluation and the expensive studies entailed without some industry research support. Most credible journals now append an author disclosure of financial or other interests, although this still is based on an honor system. Yet, these same investigators are also being vilified by the media.

On November 20, 2002, for example, “The CBS Evening News with Dan Rather” questioned the mass marketing of hormones in a segment titled “Hormone Hype.”<sup>2</sup> Targeting a well-respected expert in the area, the report clearly implied that financial support for research or lectureships indicate bias. Those of us who have been interviewed repeatedly for such reports—and quoted or misquoted—know all too well that media reporters often are determined to present their own spin, regardless of the truth.

A recent change of heart by the *NEJM* illustrates this dilemma very well. For over a decade, this journal had a policy of not allowing editorial comments or reviews to be written by acknowledged medical authorities if they had any association with the pharmaceutical industry—through research support, advisory functions, lecture honoraria, shareholding, etc.<sup>3</sup> *NEJM* editors were concerned about the possible influence of commercial associations on viewpoints and opinions expressed in their journal. The policy, as described in the Information for Authors, read:

*Because the essence of reviews and editorials is selection and interpretation of the literature, the Journal expects that authors of such articles will not have any financial interest in a company (or its competitor) that makes a product discussed in the article.*

To their chagrin, the editors found that the policy kept them from publishing reviews on recent advances in therapeutics. In fact, they were able to solicit and publish only one Drug Therapy article in two years.<sup>4</sup> Concluding that their “ability to provide comprehensive, up-to-date information, especially on recent advances in therapies, has been constrained,” the journal editors modified the policy in June 2002 to read:

*Because the essence of reviews and editorials is selection and interpretation of the literature, the Journal expects that authors of such articles will not have any significant financial interest in a company (or its competitor) that makes a product discussed in the article.*

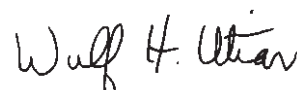
The change in policy received immediate criticism. Arnold Relman, for example, stated that the new guidelines were not sufficiently strict or explicit and concluded that “mere disclosure of these ties will not be a sufficient remedy, although it is certainly necessary.”<sup>5</sup> He called for a prohibition of conflicts of interest altogether.

So there is the rub. The widespread charge of bias is manifestly unjust, as most investigators are simply trying to move medical science forward. There is no question that some “experts” do cross the fine line between balanced review and overselling. Fortunately, this often is obvious; and almost any first-year resident or medical student at grand rounds has no problems detecting instances of bias and commercialization. But often the situation is not that transparent.

How can we in the health profession deal with the challenge of differentiating scientific credibility from imaginative marketing? There is no clear answer. Transparency is obviously essential. Therefore, *Menopause Management* will immediately introduce a policy of full disclosure from authors of future articles appearing in this publication that discuss any product or service. Our definition of significant financial interest will be in accord with that of the National Institutes

of Health (NIH) and the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), namely, setting an upper limit on the annual sum a person may receive before a relationship automatically is considered significant (the present *de minimis* level is \$10,000).<sup>6</sup>

It must be emphasized that disclosure of interests is not meant to suggest the presence of medical bias. It simply provides readers with information they can bear in mind as they turn the page. In this context, perhaps we should demand no less of our national TV news networks and anchor people. They, too, should disclose their own financial interests and investments so that we can know whether our nightly news is factually credible or simply just another infomercial!



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