



Consulting by NIH scientists

The Scientist recently published a proposal for a new rule on consulting by National Institutes of Health scientists.¹ Under this rule, consulting would be “prohibited when it involves drug, device or product related to [the scientist’s] research; permitted when company products are unrelated to [the scientist’s] research.” But this rule, proposed by the Executive Committee of the NIH Assembly of Scientists, is remarkably similar to the rules that were in existence during the 8-year period that ended in December 2003 with the Los Angeles Times’ exposé of conflicts of interest at NIH.²

During this 8-year period, hundreds of NIH scientists were consultants for drug and biotech companies. Many other NIH scientists and officials approved of or were aware of the consulting. The consulting was unknown to the public and members of Congress. Throughout the entire period, not one of the hundreds at NIH (including the 17 members of the Executive Committee) said publicly, “Maybe there’s something wrong with this practice.” In contrast, when members of Congress learned about the consulting, they recognized instantly that there was a serious problem that needed to be fixed. This led to the current strict rules,

which forbid all consulting with private companies. These rules are regarded by some at NIH and in academia as excessive, as well as harmful to the NIH’s recruitment and retention of top scientists.

In its statement, the Executive Committee speaks with optimism of the “bright line” between proper and improper consulting. If the current restrictions are lifted, will NIH officialdom, which was notably indifferent to this bright line for 8 years, not only see the line, but act accordingly?

Government officials – coaxed and pressured by groups in industry, academia, and government, including the NIH’s Executive Committee – are now considering a partial return to the old, more liberal rules on consulting. These officials, as well as members of Congress and others outside the NIH, are desperately in need of perspective – of an account and explanation of past events. What are the details and extent of the past abuses? Only a few cases are given in detail – each of them through accounts in the Los Angeles Times, none through public disclosures made by the NIH. Most of the facts are still undisclosed.

Will all those who consulted during the 8-year period of laissez faire consulting now voluntarily disclose the details of their consulting? That is unlikely. I suggest that the Executive Committee support its campaign for more liberal consulting rules by pressing NIH Director Elias Zerhouni to be fully outspoken, comprehensive, and factual about the events that created the present crisis. If he does this, it will help in the government’s evaluation of the rules on consulting and will help the NIH avoid repeating the disastrous mistakes of the past.

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References

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More on Mars

I appreciate S. Fred Singer’s comments¹ on my article, “Next Stop, Mars.”² He is correct that a focus on improved propulsion could reduce travel time to Mars and therefore radiation exposure. Also, his suggestion to use low atomic weight materials within shields is a time-honored and reasonable approach—although these shields would need to be quite thick to reduce radiation to terrestrial levels. I disagree, however, that magnetic shielding would not be effective.

The effectiveness of Earth’s magnetic field decreases with increasing latitude, so that people living near the equator receive much more protection from the field than those living close to the poles. Also, the

Earth’s magnetic field is weak. But an active shielding system for use in space could use whatever magnetic field strength is needed to provide the desired protection. Also, the spacecraft could be positioned within the protected area (i.e., at the “equator” or area of peak protection), so that the crew would always receive the maximal benefit.

There are many approaches to the problem of radiation exposure in interplanetary space. New technology (high temperature superconductors) now makes active shielding an attractive option worthy of further development. The advantages of this approach only increase as missions become longer or more frequent.

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References

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2. J. Buckley, “Next stop, Mars,” *The Scientist* 19(6):20–1, March 28, 2005.

