Comment in response to 'A question of method' by Samia A. Hurst & Alex Mauron

A recent Viewpoint (Hurst SA, Mauron A (2008) *EMBO Rep* 9: 119–123) addressed the ethical questions raised by the relationship between scientists and industrial funders using the tobacco industry in particular as an example. The article gives an excellent overview of the problems involved in such collaborations, but makes unfortunate use of one example of a rather controversial case. It concerns accusations that I committed scientific fraud—a charge I still vehemently deny—which was tried at the legal level in Switzerland. I brought a legal case against two anti-tobacco activists for accusing me of “unprecedented scientific fraud” in a press release they issued in 2001. The initial ruling in 2002 was in my favour, but later appeals by the defendants and intervention by the Swiss Federal Supreme Court eventually resulted in their acquittal in 2003 (Geneva, 2003).

As a result of the Court of Justice's decision, the University of Geneva (Switzerland) appointed Alex Mauron to chair an investigation into the matter. This investigation collaborated closely with my accusers and even thanked them for their contributions. However, in my view, the investigation was unfair for several reasons. First, the committee only comprised members of the university—none of whom had significant expertise in my specific field of environmental medicine. Second, only one out of my 20 or so collaborators was heard in evidence of my good scientific standing. Third, I was permitted a two-hour session in which to defend myself, but I was not allowed to see or comment on the final report before it was published. As the report was extremely damaging to my scientific career—both then and in the years since—I have repeatedly requested that the University of Geneva convene an international, independent investigation along

the lines followed by other institutions in similar cases. All to no avail; in fact, none of my requests to the Ministry of Education in Geneva even received a reply.

I have long since given up hope for rehabilitation into the scientific community and have come to understand, together with several other colleagues, that if one has worked with the tobacco industry, one will be chased—similar to a heretic by the Spanish Inquisition—'til the end of one's days irrespective of the scientific basis. I am a little sad, however, to see that an article of high standing refers to a case that, in my view, is not justly resolved—not only because it is used as a major example of scientific misconduct relating to conflicts of interest, but also because my adversaries are cited without mention of the several rebuttals that were published from my side (Rylander 1998, 2001, 2005). I am also sad because I actually agree with the conclusions of the article, and I believe that the rules suggested therein will improve the standing of academia in a world of commercial and other conflicts of interest.

REFERENCES

- Geneva (2003) Arrêt de la Cour de Justice, Chambre pénale, Audience du Lundi 15 Decembre 2003. Pouvoir Judiciaire, Republic and Canton of Geneva, Switzerland
Hurst SA, Mauron A (2008) A question of method. The ethics of managing conflicts of interest. *EMBO Rep* 9: 119–123
Rylander R (1998) Tobacco talk. *New Scientist*, May 30th
Rylander R (2001) The humble defence. *Eur J Publ Health* 11: 460–461
Rylander R (2005) Links with the tobacco industry. *Lancet* 365: 211

Ragnar Rylander is now retired.

E-mail: envhealth@biofact.se

doi:10.1038/embor.2008.58