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Unethical research funding contracts: Just say NO!

Scientific research is going through a difficult period. Due to the economic recession, many public funding resources have been scaled down. In this situation, research contracts with the support of the industry are welcome. However, it must be borne in mind that the relationship between the researcher and players in the biomedical field is a delicate one. While it is often based on a win-win cooperation between the researcher and the funding company, it is questionable whether it is always a winning situation for scientific truth.

Lately it has come to our attention that, in a growing number of industry-supported research programmes, the contracts include clauses leaving the publication of results to the discretion of the funding party. This practice is highly controversial and raises very important issues. While it may often be the case that the funding party has material rights over the

research, the moral ownership of the results and the right to publish these belong to the researcher. If the results of a study are not those expected by the supporting company, they nevertheless represent scientific data, and deserve to be communicated to the scientific community at large.

From an ethical point of view it is certainly unacceptable that any research should be kept undisclosed just because of commercial interests. If companies do not want to have unsatisfactory results published, they should perform their research in-house without the help of external scientists.

Moreover, apart from the ethical point of view, there are practical reasons to reject such practices. Without the knowledge of previous research, some other team might repeat a study, thus wasting precious financial and human resources.

There are some valid reasons for which a funding party could prohibit the publication of results. This could be the case when a protocol has not been followed properly or was discovered to contain major flaws, or if the researcher her- or himself acted in an unethical manner. One other reason for not publishing, which could be acceptable, but should be carefully analysed, would be in the case of early termination of the study. If such early termination is due to major problems in the realisation of the study, non-publication

may be appropriate. However, in the case of clinical studies, if termination is due to the fact that the difference between groups is so obvious that it would be unethical to continue to submit patients to an inefficient treatment modality, then results must be published.

We understand that it is very difficult for researchers, especially the younger ones, to refuse conditions imposed by companies, for fear of losing the funding. Apart from the ethical standpoint, however, this practice eventually does a disservice to both the scientist and the industry, as it casts doubt on all results obtained in industry-funded investigations.

We acknowledge the importance of industry support and involvement in high-quality research and we recognise that many players in the industry understand and respect the principle of scientific freedom and independence. Therefore, it is in everybody's interests that this independence is not the subject of suspicion.

We believe that the disclosure of financial support accompanying a publication should include a statement concerning the existence of a non-publication clause in the contract. This is the only way that such an unethical and dangerous practice will be eliminated.

For the sake of scientific freedom, if you are proposed this kind of contract, just say NO!

Published online: 4 April 2003
© Springer-Verlag 2003

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