Dilemma for journals over tobacco cash

[WASHINGTON] Editors of medical journals have given mixed reactions to last week's revelations that more than a dozen scientists received \$156,000 from the tobacco industry to write letters and manuscripts disputing the carcinogenicity of second-hand smoke.

One of the targeted journals, the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* (JNCI), is expected to change its policy and require future authors to divulge whether they have been paid by outside interests for a particular letter, and whether those interests reviewed and edited the letter.

Barnett Kramer, the journal's editor-in-chief, says the proposed change in policy aims "to be sure that we don't miss what a reasonable reader could interpret as a potential conflict".

But George Lundberg, editor of another targeted publication, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA), says he is not troubled by the fact that a scientist was paid by the tobacco industry to write to his journal. This is because the journal acknowledged in a footnote that the Tobacco Institute provided support for the analysis contained in the letter. Lundberg says: "Our policy worked well, all sides were heard and the readers were informed."

The letters were written in 1992 and 1993, just before and soon after the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) published a controversial report declaring second-hand smoke a dangerous carcinogen. They appeared in journals including JNCI, *The Lancet*, JAMA and *Pediatrics*.

The authors were paid \$2,250 to \$10,000 per letter by the Tobacco Institute, according to formerly confidential tobacco industry documents, which also reveal that two law

firms representing the industry revised some letters before submission. The documents were made public during a lawsuit brought by the state of Minnesota against the industry.

The revelations were first reported in the *St Paul Pioneer Press*, a Minnesota newspaper. The Tobacco Institute declined to comment. The law firms — Covington and Burling of Washington and Shook, Hardy & Bacon of Kansas City, Missouri — could not be reached for comment.

Four of five letters published in JNCI noted that their authors received support from the institute, or had done so in the past, as did a letter to JAMA for which Nathan Mantel, a biostatistician at the American University in Washington, DC, was paid \$10,000.

But there was no acknowledgement of support on a letter from Gio Batta Gori, a former deputy director of the Division of Cancer Causes and Prevention at the NCI, published in *The Lancet* on 10 April 1993, for which Gori was paid \$4,000. It attacks the January 1993 EPA report as being shoddy sci-

ence and concludes that "these are no trivial partisan questions in defence of tobacco interests". *The Lancet* has since changed its policy to require declaration of conflicts by authors.

Richard Horton, editor of *The Lancet*, says his reaction is one of "disgust". Gori, he says, "has breached a bond of trust as a scientist between himself and the scientific community". This, adds Horton, "is at best unethical and at worst an example of research misconduct".

Horton draws a distinction between an author receiving acknowledged support for continuing work and entering into a *quid pro quo* letter contract. "This is a project to seed the literature with a particular point of view for a defined sum of money... That's what I find so appalling."

The documents state that Gori, a consultant in Bethesda, Maryland, received \$20,137 from the Tobacco Institute for five letters. But Gori says the fact that he was paid for each letter is irrelevant: "The scientific issue is: are we right or are we wrong?"

Any attack is "libellous", he adds, "because it does not concern the substance of the matter but rather resorts to the time-honoured trick of killing the messenger when you don't like the message".

According to industry documents, the institute's strategy focused on recruiting scientists "at or near retirement with no dependence on grant-dispensing bureaucracies".

A federal judge in North Carolina ruled last month that the EPA report was based on inadequate science and was wrong in declaring environmental tobacco smoke a dangerous carcinogen. The EPA is to appeal against the decision.

Meredith Wadman

Researchers accused of wanting to rob the poor to give to NIH

[WASHINGTON] A leading organization representing US biomedical researchers has been harshly criticized by a senior Democrat, reflecting the increasingly polarized atmosphere surrounding a bill that aims to boost the budget of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) by 9.1 per cent next year.

Congressman David Obey (Democrat, Wisconsin), the senior Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee, is charging the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB) with calling for a Republican-backed \$1.24 billion NIH increase at the expense of the poor. FASEB consists of 17 societies representing 56,000 researchers in the life sciences.

In a letter of 28 July to William Brinkley, president of FASEB, Obey writes that the group has "clearly crossed the line between advocating for your own interests and advo-

cating against the interests of others whose cause is just as imperative. That the 'others' in this instance are the weakest and most vulnerable members of society makes your position that much more disappointing."

Obey's letter was prompted by one from Brinkley to members of Congress urging them to "take whatever... actions are necessary" to ensure passage of the 1999 bill that would boost NIH funding to \$14.86 billion.

Democrats are strongly opposed to the bill because it contains \$2 billion in cuts to social programmes, including the elimination of a \$1.1 billion programme of home heating for the poor and a \$871 million summer job training programme for youths (see *Nature* 394, 108 & 311; 1998).

Obey appears to have read the FASEB letter as an endorsement of these cuts. "I don't believe your members want the Congress to

move in the direction your letter is advocating," Obey wrote to Brinkley. "[Biomedical researchers] are not men and women who wish to see low income elderly forced to choose between heating and eating."

But Brinkley has denied Obey's interpretation of his letter. In a response to Obey last week he says that his letter was not intended "to advocate against the interests and programs of other communities".

Brinkley says he was suggesting that Congress find more money to add to the bill, to restore the cuts to social programmes and to boost the NIH budget. "We don't want to be partisan in any way. We felt that we should support the bill for its broad-based support of health and biomedical research."

Republican leaders aim to bring the bill to the House floor within two weeks of reconvening on 8 September.

M. W.