

Academic interest conflicts

Laxity of Californian practice

Washington

THE California Fair Political Practices Commission, which last March instituted a new financial disclosure policy for University of California faculty, has ordered an investigation of the university's enforcement of the rules. The action came after a six-month review of disclosure statements filed by faculty members revealed that 53 professors had a financial interest in the companies sponsoring their research, but that in no case did university review panels disapprove the grants or impose restrictions.

The review panels, made up of faculty members at each of the state-run university's campuses, bear the chief responsibility for reviewing the disclosure statements on which faculty must report any financial interests in a non-governmental research sponsor. The panel then makes a recommendation to the university chancellor on whether the grant should be approved.

According to the commission staff, 25 of the cases involved "significant financial interests" by principal investigators that give rise to "potential conflicts of interest in conducting the research". This financial interest usually took the form of consulting arrangements with the sponsoring company, although seven professors reported having investments of at least \$1,000 in the sponsoring company and two reported investments of more than \$100,000.

The staff provided several examples of significant financial interests that had been reported:

- Professor Michael Lovett, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), received a contract from Cetus Corporation for research on serodiagnosis of syphilis. His disclosure statement reveals consulting income from Cetus of \$1,000–\$100,000. Although the review panel at UCLA approved the application, Lovett was given a strong warning to "take great care that (a conflict of interest) . . . situation does not develop" and to avoid in particular "any inappropriate use of University facilities".

- Professor David Golde, UCLA, renewed an unspecified "collaborative agreement" with Genetics Institute. Golde reported holding 6,000 shares of Genetics Institute stock, worth \$30,000, plus vesting rights to an additional 69,000 shares. Golde is also a consultant on the board of scientific advisers of the company.

- Professor Orville Chapman, UCLA, earned more than \$10,000 as a consultant to Mobil Chemical Corporation over the past year and received a grant for research on carbon chemistry from Mobil.

"We were struck by the fact that no research was disapproved and no conditions were attached to any research application", said Robert Leidigh of the

Fair Political Practices Commission's legal division. "I'm not in a position to say they were rubber-stamped, but we don't have the documentation to tell."

So far, the commission has preferred to delegate as much responsibility as possible to the university to avoid concern over violations of academic freedom. Before last March, university faculty were exempted entirely from the disclosure requirements that apply to other state employees. But prompted by growing concern over faculty ties with outside companies and in particular by the case of Professor Ray Valentine of the University of California, Davis (who gave up a position on a research project funded by Allied Chemical after it became known that Allied had agreed to buy a 20 per cent interest in Calgene, a company founded by Valentine), the commission voted to lift the exemption (see *Nature* 296, 6; 1982).

Leidigh said the commission would not take any direct action on the 53 cases already approved by the review panels. He said also that the commission's decision on modifying the review procedure would hinge on how the panels perform over the next six months.

According to Afton Crooks, the university's conflict of interest coordinator, there are already indications that that performance may show some differences from that of the first six months. She said that there are "three to five" cases pending before review panels that have raised more serious conflict of interest questions than the 53 already approved, and that the recommendations of the review panel in one case at least "would substantially change the conditions of the research project". Details of these cases will not be available until a final decision is made by the chancellors.

Proponents of a tougher disclosure policy have seized on the findings of the commission. Al Meyerhoff of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) said, "It's even worse than we anticipated. This is far and away the largest number of potential conflicts that have come forth from any state agency". NRDC, together with California Rural Legal Assistance, has maintained that faculty should be required to disclose their financial stake in any company that might benefit from their research, regardless of the sponsor. The groups are particularly concerned about government-sponsored research at the University of California at Davis on agricultural machinery.

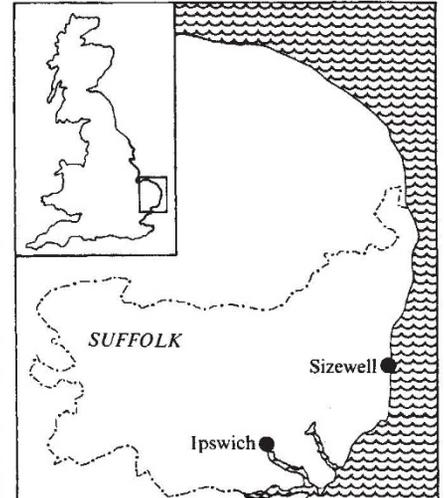
Crooks countered that "nobody has any statistics to back up his conclusion that this is a high figure". She said she had in fact expected many more cases of financial interests considering the "low threshold" (\$1,000 investment or \$250 income) for reporting. **Stephen Budiansky**

UK nuclear power

Sizewell for grabs

HIGH officials of the British Central Electricity Generating Board will spend roughly the next eight weeks in a building known as Snape Maltings, near the village of Snape in Suffolk. Eight weeks is the estimated time that will be needed by the board to put across to a public inquiry which opened on Monday this week the case for building a 1,100 MW pressurized water reactor, to be known as Sizewell B, on the coast a few miles north of the town of Aldeburgh.

Although the generating board first made public its wish to build Sizewell B at a parliamentary inquiry in 1972, the chance that it would be allowed to do so without formality was scotched in 1978 when Mr Tony Benn, then Minister of Energy in the British government, undertook that



neither the plan to build a pressurized water reactor nor that for building a commercial fast reactor (now put off indefinitely) would go ahead without a formal public inquiry.

The Thatcher government has appointed Sir Frank Layfield, a lawyer best known as chairman of the inquiry in the early 1970s into alternative methods of financing local government, as its inspector. He will receive technical assistance from Dr J. Vennart, director of the Medical Research Council's radiobiology unit, and from Mr Christopher Foster, a professor of economics at the London School of Economics. Arrangements have been made for the inquiry to move to London on 2 June and if necessary to return to Suffolk in September. The inspector's report to the Department of Energy is not expected before 1984; the minister is not bound to accept the recommendation.

The scope of the inquiry is deliberately broad, covering not merely the technical design of the reactor and questions of safety stemming therefrom but also questions of the need for nuclear energy, or indeed of new generating plant of any kind, when British demand for electricity is virtually stagnant. ●