

Regulators pull contract for chemical review

When US government regulators hired the firm Sciences International to help review a potentially dangerous chemical, they almost certainly didn't intend to ignite a political firestorm.

But the company's links to the chemical industry have enraged environmentalists and forced the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) to pull the contract. Last week, in the face of growing pressure from both Congress and the public, the agency announced that it would re-review the 20 chemicals that the company had been involved in studying.

Scientists, environmental groups and even private contractors say that the situation highlights a weakness in federal environmental and health regulation. Private companies hired to do risk assessments are rarely required to disclose conflicts of interest. And often, the companies have relationships with the industries that the regulators are charged with overseeing. "It is definitely a problem," says Sandra Schubert, director of government affairs for the Environmental Working Group, the watchdog based in Washington DC that criticized the work.

The review involves bisphenol A, a chemical

commonly found in plastics, including baby bottles and microwave containers. The chemical disrupts the endocrine system in mice, and some researchers think that it might cause similar effects in humans. Both Japanese and European regulators say that more research is needed to determine whether the chemical is harmful.

In July 2005, the NIEHS hired Sciences International of Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a panel to summarize hundreds of studies on bisphenol A. The firm

had done the same sort of work many times before for the agency. But this time, the Environmental Working Group caught wind of the study and learned that Sciences International had two clients — Dow Chemical and BASF — that produce bisphenol A. In late February, the advocacy group wrote to the agency demanding a review of Sciences International's role in the study. After several weeks of mounting pressure, the NIEHS announced that it was scrapping its contract and reviewing the work already done on bisphenol A and the other chemicals.

Several scientists involved in the review told *Nature* they think Sciences International had behaved ethically and impartially. "I really don't

"The panel should be shut down."



think that they were trying to influence the process," says Simon Hayward, a cancer biologist at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee.

But others contend that the company was deliberately stacking the review literature in favour of industry. "All those reports are suspect," says Frederick vom Saal, an endocrinologist at the University of Missouri at Columbia, who was not involved in the review. "The panel should be shut down."

Independent scientists on the bisphenol-A panel were required to sign conflict-of-interest forms, but Sciences International was not. The

Online resources threaten livelihood of libraries

The closure of five of the 26 regional libraries of the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) last year sparked international protest. Congressional hearings were held, and a government investigation was launched. In February this year, the president of the American Library Association told Congress that the closures have restricted access to information in at least 31 states.

The EPA is not alone — last year, the Department of Energy closed its headquarters library in Washington DC. And now, NASA is considering downsizing its network of libraries — including the one at its leading science-research centre, the Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland.

Tight budgets could bring even more whittling of libraries in the United States. "When budgets are threatened, agencies tend to say let's put the library on the chopping block," says Tara Olivero, assistant director at the American Library Association in Washington DC.

Libraries are already working to reinvent themselves in a digital world in which online access is fast reducing the need for rows of books and stacks of journals. But a full transition to electronic resources might not save money as agencies hope.

Officials at the EPA, whose libraries provide a wide range of information about environmental protection and management,

initially cited a proposed budget cut of US\$2 million — an 80% drop from the previous year — as the main reason for downsizing its library network. Yet critics point out that internal EPA studies have suggested that having a librarian saves between \$3 and \$7

in professional staff time for every dollar invested. Since the closures, EPA librarians have struggled to maintain the same level of cost effectiveness. On requesting a publication from another library, they are sometimes told that the item is not available and that no one



Replacing books with electronic resources may not save money.



A review on the safety of bisphenol A, found in baby bottles, is under scrutiny for conflicts of interest.

company did volunteer to report any potential conflicts of interest, according to Sciences International's president Herman Gibb. But he says that there was no conflict because the staff working on bisphenol A were not working for private clients. "We didn't do anything wrong," he says. "This is unfair with a capital 'U'."

Sciences International's website says that about half of its business comes from private companies and half from the government, and it is hardly alone in that regard. A brief

investigation by *Nature* turned up at least half a dozen other firms that work simultaneously for federal regulators and industry — sometimes in the same area.

For instance, in 2005, Syracuse Research Corporation, a non-profit company based in New York, was hired by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to help review perchlorates, which are reactive salts that can damage the thyroid. At the same time, the company's defence division was partnered with Lockheed



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Martin, a firm that has been sued for leaking perchlorates. Syracuse has an internal panel to review potential conflicts of interest, says spokeswoman Lisa Mondello. In this case, she says, the company collaborated with a division of Lockheed that doesn't handle perchlorates. "It's really not connected," she says.

"The larger the company, the more it becomes an issue," says James Lamb, a toxicologist with the Weinberg Group, a consultancy firm based in Washington DC that does regulatory work for private industry. Lamb says that some companies, like Sciences International, try to segregate industrial and government work to limit conflicts, but few if any regulators have rules about disclosing or managing such issues. "Conflicts of interest have never really been completely ignored," he says. "But I really don't know what the legal process has been."

In fact, the relationships are a legal grey area that has troubled regulators in the past. In 2004, the US Environmental Protection Agency and the NIEHS came under fire for accepting US\$2 million from the American Chemistry Council — an industry lobby group — to conduct a children's health study (see *Nature* 432, 6; 2004). The agencies eventually withdrew from the arrangement, and a subsequent investigation by the US Government Accountability Office found that stronger guidelines were needed. Both agencies say that they have since rewritten their guidelines about directly taking funds from industry. ■

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knows where it is, says Bernadine Abbott Hoduski, a former EPA librarian.

The agency is working to convert all EPA documents into an electronic format, and its spokeswoman Jessica Emond says that the project "has not incurred additional cost". But critics argue that for agencies considering downsizing their physical libraries, going electronic will almost certainly require more, not less, money.

For a start, not everything can be digitized, and dedicated staff are needed to assess what material should be put in digital form. Content must also be produced using technologies that will be usable decades in the future. "In many ways you need a higher level of expertise to produce and maintain an electronic service than a physical one," says Anne Kinney, a

NASA scientist and chair of a group that recently assessed how the print materials at the Goddard library could be reduced.

The demand for library services other than shelf space has shown no sign of tapering off and, if anything, has increased in recent years. To ensure that electronic resources don't result in costs simply being transferred to individual researchers, those services need sustained funding, librarians say.

At the Naval Research Laboratory library in Washington DC, chief librarian James King says that he has seen a dramatic falling-off in the number of people walking through the door. But "space is not synonymous with service", he says. Use of the naval library's online databases has doubled in the past five years.

"There is a risk of people seeing libraries only as warehouses," King says. He and others argue that in a time of information overload, librarians have an ever-more-valuable role in designing web interfaces that facilitate browsing

"Space is not synonymous with service."

and focused searches. They also create and operate databases specific to the needs of the research communities they serve, and have intricate knowledge of electronic resources across agency- and university-library networks. And in a world where new journals are continually coming online, librarians say they are best placed to negotiate with publishers to obtain the cheapest site-licence

contracts and to monitor the changing needs of a specific community of users.

For her part, Kinney envisions a different future for the science library. Instead of silent halls with towering racks of books, smaller meeting places could double up as information centres, where researchers can plug in their laptops, hold discussions, and talk to librarians about how to navigate the myriad resources online.

NASA has not yet made any decisions about closing any libraries, but the issue is likely to remain on the table: "The NASA budget isn't getting any bigger," notes Robin Dixon, chief librarian of Goddard. The challenge will be to cut back on physical resources without cutting back on service. ■

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