THE FIRST WORD/

COMING CLEAN

Joshua Lederberg does it right. Whenever we have heard him publicly address a public issue, the Nobel Prize winner and president of the Rockefeller University has prefaced his comments with a resume of his own biases—including a list of those commercial ventures in which he has an interest. It is a display of such probity that we have never heard anyone later try to dismiss his advice as the simple utterance of self-interest.

This comes to mind because of a recent exchange of letters between representatives of five environmental policy groups and the U.S. National Academy of Sciences (together with its operating agency, the National Research Council). In general, NAS advisory groups begin their deliberations with a discussion of the committee members' possible biases—personal beliefs, fiduciary involvements, or professional inclinations. Among people of integrity, a frank diversity of viewpoints enriches, not taints, the exchange. Last year, the NAS formed a new Committee on the Scientific Evaluation of the Introduction of Genetically Modified Microorganisms and Plants into the Environment, to follow up on the much-publicized work of an earlier committee. In November, representatives of the Environmental Defense Fund, the Environmental Policy Institute, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the National Wildlife Federation, and the National Audubon Society wrote to Frank Press, chairman of the NAS. The environmentalists asked Press to release the results of that committee's discussion of its members' commercial involvements.

In January, Dr. Press replied with a letter enumerating the Academy's reasons for wishing to keep that information confidential, but ultimately neither agreeing nor refusing to release the data.

This is not the most important issue of our time, but it is nonetheless difficult to see where the proper course lies. In principle, we believe that casual, voluntary, matter-of-fact public display of one's personal axes is appropriate—especially when coupled with a wry acknowledgement when one starts grinding them on committee time.

But that is a far cry from any ritual of public confession and penitence, any *auto da fe* of the industrial heresy. At one point in the story of Beowulf, that most sanguinary hero wrenches the monster Grendel's arm from its socket and proceeds to beat the beast over the head with his own limb. We are afraid that information extracted from NAS committees under compulsion will be used in just that way: as a club with which to belabor the committee members and call their sincere evaluations into question.

The National Wildlife Federation's Margaret Mellon argues that early disclosure "inoculates" the committee against later charges of conflict of interest. Arthur Kelman, the University of Wisconsin professor of plant pathology who chaired the first NAS committee on environmental release, has no reservations about discussing any of his own consulting and advisory arrangements, but he worries about further burdening volunteer committee members with a lot of disclosure rigamarole—an exercise whose main message seems to be, "we can't trust you."

In the present case, we think that information gathered under a promise of confidentiality should be kept confidential. NAS should not release it. If the petitioning groups (which include, we should note for the record, some people we consider friends) really fear conflict of interest, most of the information is probably available in published reports somewhere.

That said, there is nothing to stop the members of the environmental release committee from voluntarily releasing a summary of its members' outside interests—in environmental causes and biotechnology companies alike.

The sooner scientists, moved by an inner sense of propriety, get in the habit of laying all their cards on the table, the better.

As we said, Joshua Lederberg does it right. —Douglas McCormick

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