

Controversies in Sexual Medicine

Clinical and Basic Science Research in Sexual Medicine Must Rely, in Part, on Pharmaceutical Funding?

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. The conflict of interest in sexual medicine (SM) is a never-ending debate between scientists who consider possible and fruitful the partnership between science and the pharmaceutical industry (pharma) and others who are afraid that such a relationship might contaminate the veracity of scientific research. The aim of this *Controversy* is to appreciate opinions from both perspectives.

Methods. Four scientists (three from academic or private practice and one employee of the industry) with expertise in the area of SM were asked to contribute with their opinions.

Main Outcome Measure. Expert opinion supported by the critical review of the currently available literature.

Result. Expert #1, who is *Controversy's* section editor, and Expert #3 consider industry involvement in the field of SM problematic but potentially synergistic with the aim of science. On the other side, the Experts #2 and 4 argue that it is almost impossible to serve two masters. They believe that the pharma involved both in basic and applied research may jeopardize the independent evolution of the young SM.

Conclusions. After reading this *Controversy*, *The Journal of Sexual Medicine's* readers should be able to judge by themselves the claims of the discussants and if the partnership between industry and SM is a risk or a potential benefit. **Jannini EA, Eardley I, Sand M, and Hackett G. Clinical and basic science research in sexual medicine must rely, in part, on pharmaceutical funding?. J Sex Med 2010;7:2331–2337.**

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In a perfect, utopic world, the economic effort to sustain research would be public, driven by an interest in the growth of knowledge and the health of population. However, in the real world (Utopia is from the Greek: οὐ, “not”, and τόπος, “place”), two different vectors drive in opposite directions: the research, interested primarily in patient care and scientific advance, having the patient as the primary stakeholder and industry, interested primarily in commercial outcomes having as principal

stakeholder the shareholder [1]. Can the directions of these vectors be convergent in the interest of science? Two British scientists, Ian Eardley, president of the European Society of Sexual Medicine (ESSM), and Geoff Hackett, consultant in Urology and sexual medicine (SM), who were invited to debate and argue, are strongly in favor of pure science. President Eardley suggests that the funding for SM research will soon be finished. This is possible, although the progress frequently

follows providential ways, as suggested by Dr. Michael Sand, a member of the industry. Dr. Hackett reviews some of the many scientific scandals that recently demonstrated how dangerous the economic interest can be both for science and in the general patients' health.

As a scientist, I must side with Ian and Geoff: the debt with industry funding may be dangerously paid off by our dishonest research. However, being the personal recipient of both public and industrial grants, speaker, and consultant for several companies involved in SM, I cannot be a hypocrite. I must admit that the *caveats* of my colleagues have to be taken seriously into account. I strongly sustain the need for as many antidotes as possible for keeping science in general, and the young SM in particular, clean of misconduct. But this does not necessarily mean that we need to avoid completely a correct and explicit industrial partnership. It is, in fact, well known that close collaboration between academia and pharma has facilitated the development of several new drugs, not only in SM [2].

"The Credit Cycle" is an economic term meaning "a cycle involving the access to credit by borrowers." In science, it is a potentially virtuous circle in which industry grants drive research, which in turn yield to publications, which are the instruments to have new grants. We have to admit that the potentially perverse version of this cycle, well known as *Publish or Perish*, may be also fed by industrial financing. Both academy and industry reward those with the longest CVs and the most publications, i.e., those who collected more grants not only from public but also from private, industrial sources. Under pressure to generate voluminous outputs, scientists often fall prey to double publishing, self-plagiarism, and submitting the "minimal publishable unit" [3]. Some industries decided to defend themselves from scientists not interested in quality but in quantity of publications. With this aim, they use the EQUATOR Network website (ENW)—the resource center for good reporting of health research studies as a standard for financing research [4]. ENW is an international initiative that seeks to improve reliability and value of medical research literature by promoting transparent and accurate reporting of research studies. I believe that this is a way to have a "perfect" scientific environment, where grants from industry are used for applied as well as for basic or nonsponsored research.

Now I have to ask myself: who is really interested in keeping the industry far from research? For sure, plenty of good scientists, as in the Faculty of this *Controversy*, are against the "dirty hands" of pharma on research. However, I am afraid that others may have other less noble motivations. We have to admit that a poor scientist, with poor research and with poor ideas not interesting for pharma may take this side for the reason that he/she is . . . a poor scientist. Will this researcher be in favor of pharmaceutical funding? No, definitively not. But he/she may claim that he/she is not publishing because he/she is not financed for being too honest for making business with industry . . .

Some against industrial partnership in SM research identified the entire field of female sexual dysfunction (FSD) as guilty being created only to prepare a market for new medications [5] rather than to explore the science of female sexuality. Three points have been raised against the connection between industry and science:

1. Difficulties become dysfunctions that become diseases [5]. It has been argued that the entire story of FSD is a matter of business. This may be partly true, but it is not (just) business of companies. Being against medicalization (a politically incorrect term which we should be proud to use much more frequently in the interest of sexual health of our patients) is for sure a position against industry, but it is also subtly in favor of another lobby. This is the lobby of some old-fashioned psycho-sexologists who ground their work exclusively on opinions and not on evidences. Some of them are unable to renew themselves, repeating again and again the identical therapeutic model of Masters, Johnson, and Kaplan, never providing data on the outcome, unable to use the Galilean, scientific method, ignoring statistics, and not capable of accepting the challenge from SM [6]. For sure, this lobby is strongly against pharmaceutical funding. But, I am afraid, not in the interest of science! On the contrary, I know several great scientists coming from the psycho-sexological environment who are a fundamental resource for SM.
2. It has been argued that national and international meetings on FSD (and SM) are cosponsored by interested companies [5]. Furthermore, communications at meetings are not

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