

This is the unedited version of a column which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2001. The published version may have had minor changes.

### **Media Bites: A prize problem**

Richard Smith, the editor of the British Medical Journal, stresses that he is not anti-business. He could hardly say otherwise, being such a successful businessman himself. Apart from his role as chief provocateur at the journal, he is chief executive of the BMJ Publishing Group, which made a healthy profit last year of about six million pounds.

So Smith takes a broad perspective on concerns about growing links between big business and universities. There can be benefits for both sides, he told a seminar at the University of Sydney during a recent visit to Australia.

But Smith also argued strongly that universities should take care when negotiating funding contracts with pharmaceutical companies to ensure that the traditional academic values of independence and right to publication are maintained.

He cited a stack of examples suggesting many researchers have conflicts of interest, which can influence research outcomes (see <http://www.bmj.com/misc/talks> for examples).

Of course, Smith is famous for his own conflict of interest case. When Nottingham University accepted 3.8 million pounds from British American Tobacco (BAT) to fund a centre for corporate responsibility, he resigned as professor of medical journalism.

The potential for commercial funding and sponsorship to raise conflicts of interest is also a topical issue for journalists. One of the most obvious tactics for groups wishing to influence media coverage of a particular issue has been to establish journalism awards.

Current and past examples include the Eli Lilly award for “excellence in journalism in the field of menopause” which later became a women’s health journalism award; a Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists award for reporting about eye health; MBF awards for promoting public understanding of better health; an Amgen award for promoting public understanding of biotechnology; Australian Federation

of AIDS Organisations awards for promoting public understanding of HIV/AIDS issues, and the Peter Grieve Memorial award, jointly sponsored by the Royal Australian College of GPs and a drug company. Not to mention the Kelloggs award for nutrition reporting. Prizes have included overseas trips, computers and cash payouts of up to \$5,000.

Interestingly, the National Asthma Council's award is no longer sponsored by a pharmaceutical manufacturer because the Council "felt it more appropriate not to have a sponsor".

The Australian Museum has joined the trend towards commercialisation of awards, establishing the Pfizer Eureka Prize for Health and Medical Research Journalism, with \$10,000 prize money from Pfizer. It will be judged by Pfizer's media affairs manager, Craig Regan, two scientists and an ABC science journalist.

The award has raised hackles in many quarters. Robyn Williams, the senior ABC science broadcaster who helped establish the Eureka Awards, is just one of many leading journalists and academics to express reservations.

Regan says the prize is part of a strategy to improve Pfizer's relationship with the media, but dismisses suggestions it could influence media coverage of his company as "ridiculous".

Pfizer has a reputation for aggressive marketing and media strategies. Pfizer, together with Pharmacia, recently wrote to doctors condemning as "irresponsible journalism" stories in Australian Doctor and Medical Observer raising concerns about celecoxib safety.

But the award raises a bigger issue than Pfizer or its media strategy: should journalists accept sponsorship, gifts or other financial incentives from those they might be writing about?

The Australasian Medical Writers Association is currently developing a policy on sponsorship, a vexed issue for the organisation as it represents both journalists and public relations professionals whose views on such issues rarely coincide.

Others, however, believe the issue is clear-cut. Andrew Holtz, head of the Association of Health Care Journalists in the US, says it is his

personal view that journalists should not accept anything of substantial value from an organisation or individual they report on.

He asks: “How could a journalist who accepted money from Pfizer then critique the objectivity of medical professionals with financial ties to the company?”

The National Prescribing Service’s Stephen Phillips also has concerns: “If a journalist chooses to enter this award then they place themselves at risk of being directly connected to a conflict of interest and their professional work will be judged accordingly.”

One solution might be to scrap the sponsorship altogether and have an award which is rich in credibility, if not cash.