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## DISEASE MONGERING

*by Bob Burton and Andy Rowell*

The bulk of the world's drug deals are not done secretly in dark alleyways or noisy nightclubs but involve government-approved drugs prescribed by doctors or bought over the counter in pharmacies and supermarkets.

The global pharmaceutical industry—which generated revenues of more than \$364 billion in 2001—is the world's most profitable stock market sector. According to IMS Health, the leading drug industry market analyst, half the global drug sales are in the US alone, with Europe and Japan accounting for another 37%.

While the common image of the legal drug industry is of workers in white lab coats, the reality is that public relations, marketing and administration commonly absorb twice the amount spent on drug research and development. During 2000 more than \$13.2 billion was spent on pharmaceutical marketing in the US alone.

Driving the annual double-digit growth in the legal drug supply are a band of specialist "healthcare" PR companies working for behemoths such as Pfizer, GlaxoSmithKline, Merck and Astra Zeneca. Heading the healthcare PR league table are Edelman, Ruder Finn and Chandler Chicco Agency in the US and Medical Action Communications, Shire Health Group and Meditech Media in the UK.

*continued on next page*

## FLACK ATTACK

This issue illustrates once again how propaganda continues to undermine public welfare. Beginning with the article above, Bob Burton and Andy Rowell show how drug and biotechnology industry PR suppresses important health information while persuading patients to consume drugs of questionable safety and efficacy. In "Weapons of Mass Deception," *PR Watch* editor Sheldon Rampton shows how the Bush administration's use of propaganda has actually undermined the international reputation of the United States and may lead to a disastrous war.

Propaganda permeates modern society in part because of very design of the mass media, in which a small number of individuals broadcast messages to millions of passive recipients. The Internet has contributed to breaking down this artificial dichotomy between

"broadcaster" and "audience." This March, we launched a new website that we hope will go further still. The "Disinfopedia ([www.disinfopedia.org](http://www.disinfopedia.org)) is not just an "encyclopedia of propaganda." It creates an alternative media environment. Modeled after the successful example of open source software, it lets anyone contribute an article, and—equally importantly—also lets anyone *edit* the articles that other people have written. Its very design undermines the propaganda model, creating a collaborative environment in which people can come together to study, analyze and demystify disinformation.

Please visit the Disinfopedia and try it out for yourself. We believe it offers an exciting opportunity to demonstrate that "the masses" can do just as good a job of analyzing and understanding the world as the journalists and politicians who claim to be our "opinion leaders."

“Medical education” includes cultivating and deploying sponsored “key opinion leaders” such as doctors. Patient groups too can be created or wooed to assist with “disease awareness campaigns” or provide emotionally charged testimony in favour of speedy regulatory approval of new drugs.

Other lucrative revenue streams for healthcare PR companies can include organizing events such as medical conferences that provide a platform for well-trained “product champions” to announce promising results of drug research. Such results can be reported by medical journalists—who can be hired by PR firms—in medical journals that they can create for their clients.

PR companies also undertake conventional lobbying strategies such as opposing restrictions on “direct to consumer” (DTC) advertising—currently only allowed in the US and New Zealand—that sells drugs using the same techniques used to sell products like toothpaste.

Add to the mix the usual grab bag of tricks in issue management for dealing with dissenting scientists or journalists and you have the world of healthcare PR.

## BUZZ FOR DRUGS

According to Bob Chandler and Gianfranco Chicco, former staffers at the PR firm of Burson-Marsteller the key to promoting drugs is creating “buzz.” In 1997 Chandler and Chicco teamed up to found the Chandler Chicco Agency (CCA), which now boasts offices in New York and London and is ranked among the top healthcare PR companies.

CCA has plenty of experience creating “buzz,” having launched Pfizer’s \$1 billion-a-year impotence drug, Viagra and the arthritis drug Celebrex for Pharmacia and Pfizer, which last year turned over \$3.1 billion.

In a contributed article to the trade magazine *PharmaVoice*, Chandler and Chicco explained that “while buzz should always appear to be spontaneous, it should, in fact, be scientifically crafted and controlled as tightly as advertising in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.”

One of the reasons for Viagra’s success, they explained, was “Pfizer’s sensitive and responsible approach” to encouraging potential patients to talk openly about impotence. To create “disease awareness,” they hired celebrities and public officials to talk publicly about “erectile dysfunction,” their preferred terminology.

“The buzz spread through the media, virtually eliminating the taboo word ‘impotence,’” they wrote. In the US, they hired former Vice President Bob Dole to endorse the product, turning Viagra into “success beyond a marketer’s wildest dreams.”

Impotence Australia (IA), Pfizer’s front group down under, launched an advertising campaign with PR sup-

port from Hill & Knowlton. The campaign hit a snag, however, when its undisclosed ties to Pfizer were detailed in separate articles in *Australian Doctor* and the *Australian Financial Review*. Ray Moynihan, the author of the *AFR* story, revealed that Pfizer had bankrolled Impotence Australia to the tune of \$200,000 Australian dollars (US \$121,000). In an interview with Moynihan, IA Executive Officer Brett McCann admitted, “I could understand that people may have a feeling that this is a front for Pfizer.”

A later Impotence Australia advertising campaign featured Pele, the Brazilian soccer legend. “Erection problems are a common medical condition but they can be successfully treated. So talk to your doctor today . . . I would,” Pele advised.

## WHAT WOMEN WANT

While some PR firms work to gain media profile for their clients, others work hosing down bad publicity. In January 2003, for example, pharmaceutical companies were caught with their pants down when the *British Medical Journal* featured an article by Moynihan challenging the use of exaggerated statistics by corporate-sponsored scientists seeking to create a new medical “syndrome” called “female sexual dysfunction.”

Moynihan’s article was picked up by hundreds of other publications around the world, prompting a hasty response by Michelle Lerner of the bio-technology and pharmaceutical PR company HCC DeFacto. Lerner, a former business reporter for *Miami Today*, scrambled to mobilize “third party” allies. She dispatched an e-mail to a number of women’s health groups.

“We think it’s important to counter [Moynihan] and get another voice on the record,” the email stated. “I was wondering whether you or someone from your organisation may be willing to work with us to generate articles in Canada countering the point of view raised in the *BMJ*. This would involve speaking with select reporters about [female sexual dysfunction], its causes and treatments,” she wrote.

As often happens in today’s wired world, a copy of Lerner’s email was forwarded to Moynihan. He contacted Lerner, who refused to disclose the identity of her client, stating that doing so would “violate ethical guidelines.” When we contacted Lerner ourselves, she declined further comment and suggested that we interview HCC DeFacto Director Richard Cripps. All he would tell us, however, is that “I don’t want to get into the specifics at this stage.”

We also interviewed Moynihan, who expressed disgust with HCC DeFacto’s crude campaign. “The participation of the corporate sector in that debate [on

female sexual dysfunction] is extremely welcome if it is open. If they are going to try and get their message out there via small community groups without their fingerprints on it, that is just pathetic," he said.

Kathleen O'Grady, the editor of *A Friend Indeed*, a newsletter for Canadian women in menopause and midlife, was one of the recipients of Lerner's e-mail. She told us that she was "surprised, and then very angry ... They wanted to use our credibility to bolster their public relations. Under no circumstances would we ever agree to such an arrangement."

## DISEASE AWARENESS

Writing for the *British Medical Journal*, Moynihan joined physicians David Henry and Iona Heath in warning that drug company marketing campaigns over-emphasize the benefits of medication. "Alternative approaches—emphasising the self-limiting or relatively benign natural history of a problem, or the importance of personal coping strategies—are played down or ignored," they wrote.

Conventional wisdom says that drugs are developed in response to disease. Often, however, the power of pharma PR creates the reverse phenomenon, in which new diseases are defined by companies seeking to create a market to match their drug.

A decade ago, the late journalist Lynn Payer wrote a book titled *Disease Mongering*, in which she described the confluence of interests of doctors, drug companies and media in exaggerating the severity of illness and the ability of drugs to "cure" them. "Since disease is such a fluid and political concept, the providers can essentially create their own demand by broadening the definitions of dis-

eases in such a way as to include the greatest number of people, and by spinning out new diseases," she wrote.

Pharma PR practitioners are sometimes quite candid as they discuss the art of creating a need for a new product. "Once the need has been established and created, then the product can be introduced to satisfy that need/desire," states Harry Cook in the "Practical Guide to Medical Education," published by the UK-based *Pharmaceutical Marketing* magazine.

Sometimes patient groups are created out of whole cloth to boost a new drug that is about to emerge from a drug company's "pipeline." Most of the time, however, drug companies woo existing non-profit patient groups. "Partnering with advocacy groups and thought leaders at major research institutions helps to defuse industry critics by delivering positive messages about the health-care contributions of pharma companies," explains Teri Cox from Cox Communication Partners, New Jersey, in a September 2002 commentary in *Pharma Executive*.

Corporate-sponsored "disease awareness campaigns" typically urge potential consumers to consult their doctor for advice on specific medications. This advice works in tandem with corporate efforts to influence doctors, the final gatekeepers for prescription drugs.

According to Julia Cook of the Surrey-based Lowe Fusion Healthcare, potential "product champions" and "opinion leaders" in the medical fraternity are critical to influencing doctors' thinking. "The key is to evaluate their views and influence potential, to recruit them to specially designed relationship building activities and then provide them with a programme of appropriate communications platforms," Cook wrote in the "Practical Guide to Medical Education."

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Recruiting potential supporters to an advisory committee, she says, allows time to develop a closer relationship and evaluation of how they can “best be used.” However, a delicate touch is required. “Credibility can also be undermined by overuse,” Cook warned. “If you front the same people to speak at your symposia, write publications, etc., they will be inevitably be seen as being in your pocket.”

Obtaining favourable coverage in medical journals is also an important element in pharmaceutical marketing. An investigation by the *Journal of the American Medical Association* article found that it was a commonplace practice for articles to be “ghostwritten” for well-respected medical researchers.

Based in Oxford, England, 4D Communications is one of the PR firms that helps, in the words of its web site, to “mix experienced scientists with marketers and creatives to create memorable educational and commercial programmes.” According to Emma Sergeant, 4D’s managing director, PR companies can help with the “creation of authoritative journals.” Indeed, drug company-sponsored publications are so lucrative that in 1995

Edelman established a subsidiary company, BioScience Communications, to “meet the education needs of major pharmaceutical firms.”

Journals, though, can achieve far more than touting the benefits of a new drug. Publications can be used to create a market “by creating dissatisfaction with existing products and creating the need for something new,” wrote Harry Cook from ICC Europe in a medical publishing guide. “Reprints [of journal articles] can be a very powerful selling tool, as they are perceived as being independent and authoritative.” Indeed, this perception of independence and authority is precisely what healthcare PR uses to keep the public from realizing that much of what they see, hear and read about drugs originates from sources beset with conflicts of interest.

In creating or co-opting patient groups, hiring “product champions” and cultivating doctors, PR companies make it harder for citizens to obtain accurate, genuinely independent information to enable informed health decisions. While healthcare PR campaigns are undoubtedly effective in selling more drugs, they don’t necessarily make for a healthy population. ■

## THE TOP FIVE HEALTHCARE PR FIRMS

**Edelman** is the largest independently owned PR firm in the world and is headquartered in New York with an international network of offices. According to O’Dwyer’s PR Services, Edelman raked in fees of \$57.9 million in 2001 from healthcare PR, more than a fourth of its total revenues of \$220.7 million. Its client list includes Abbott Laboratories, American Health Care Association, American Home Products, AstraZeneca, Bayer, Eli Lilly & Co., GlaxoSmithKline, Hoffmann-La Roche, Johnson & Johnson, Merck, Novartis Ortho-McNeil Pharmaceutical, Pfizer, Pharmacia, Procter & Gamble, and Schering-Plough Corp.

**Ruder Finn** earned \$37.5 million from healthcare PR in 2001, nearly half of its total revenues of \$80.3 million. Its client list includes Consumer Health Products Association, Eurocancer, King Pharmaceuticals, Ligand Pharmaceuticals, Inc, Novartis, Novo Nordisk Pharmaceuticals, Pfizer, Pharmacia, Prochon Biotech, Procter & Gamble, Schering Laboratories, and Solvay Pharmaceuticals.

In the UK, **Medical Action Communications Ltd** (MAC) generated revenues of \$25 million in 2002.

MAC employs 100 people in its offices in Surrey, UK and New Jersey, US and is a subsidiary of the Quintiles Transnational Corporation. Unlike other healthcare PR companies, MAC does not disclose the names of any of its clients, obliquely referring to them as “US & EU based multinationals.”

**Noonan Russo/Presence** is a specialist healthcare PR company headquartered in New York that \$19.7 million in business in 2001. Clients include Aventis, Eli Lilly & Co., Maxim Pharmaceuticals, Pharmacia Corp., Santen Pharmaceuticals, and United American Healthcare.

According to the British edition of *PR Week*, the **Shire Health Group**—which includes a number of healthcare PR and consultancy companies including Shire Health International, Shire Health New York, 4D Communications—billed clients more than £8.7 million (approximately \$14.2 million) in 2001. Its client list includes AstraZeneca, F.Hoffmann-La Roche, GlaxoSmithKline, Novartis, Nucletron, Pfizer, Boehringer Ingelheim, Pharmacia, Roche, Schering and Wyeth. Shire is owned by the global advertising giant, WPP.

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# FROM PATIENT ACTIVISM TO ASTROTURF MARKETING

by Bob Burton and Andy Rowell

“So what does PR stand for?” asked Nancy Turett, the president and global director of Edelman Health. “It stands for powerful relationships. The heart of PR is third-party credibility,” Turett wrote in *Pharmaceutical Executive* in September 2002.

“Third-party messages are an essential means of communication for validating scientific credibility, for legitimizing products, for building brand and disease awareness, and for building defenses against crises,” Turett wrote. “As advocates develop louder voices, pharma companies must forge alliances and win allies.”

## AIDS AND THE RISE OF ACTIVISM MARKETING

Until the late 1980s, healthcare PR concentrated on cultivating doctors and wooing government regulators. That began to change in part due to the emergence of AIDS activism. In 1987 the US-based AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) raised citizen-led health activism to new levels, using civil disobedience protests to embarrass drug companies for profiteering, regulators for slow approval of new drugs and governments for inadequate research funding.

For drug companies, AIDS activism presented both a challenge and a new marketing opportunity. “Our strategy was not to try and reach every AIDS activist . . . So we tried reaching out to a few and have them work as ambassadors,” recalls John Doorley, the head of corporate communications at Merck Pharmaceuticals in the early 1990s.

Doorley, now teaching corporate communications at Rutgers University in New Jersey, devised Merck’s strategy for managing AIDS activism. He established a corporate advisory committee, took members on plant tours and rewrote clinical trial consent forms. When ACT UP San Francisco members planned to protest against Merck, advisory committee members came to the company’s rescue. “They called the guys in San Francisco and said, ‘You go to any other company you want to, but not Merck,’” Doorley recalled in an interview with *PR Week*.

In the ensuing decade, drug companies realized the potential benefits of investing in patient groups. In January 2000, Urch Publishing, which offers “business intelligence and information for management in biotechnology, pharmaceuticals and chemicals companies,” issued an \$800-per-copy report titled *Patient Groups and the Global Pharmaceutical Industry*.

“The perception that industry-patient group collaborations can lead to unwelcome publicity is the principal reason holding many potentially fruitful relationships back,” wrote Fred Mills, a UK-based former pharmaceutical industry executive. “Despite this, groups are

biting the bullet and some of the early efforts at partnerships have been very worthy and mutually beneficial.”

Teri Cox from the New Jersey-based Cox Communication Partners expressed similar enthusiasm in a September 2002 issue of *Pharma Executive*. Industry-patient “partnerships,” she wrote, could “influence changes in healthcare policy and regulations to expand patient access to, and coverage for, earlier diagnoses and treatments . . . recruit participants for clinical trials” and “speed the development and approval process for new therapies.” Better still, an alliance with a non-profit group can deter inquisitive journalists. “Without such allies, a skeptical journalist may see a company’s messages as self-serving and describe them as such to their audiences,” Cox wrote.

“There are no better, more credible advocates for maximising access to a therapy than the patients who are going to benefit from it,” explained Emmanuealla Dekonor and Simon Taylor from the PR firm of GPC International in a guide to working with patient groups that was published in 2002. However, they acknowledged that there would also be “potential areas of conflict” including “price—they will always think it is too high” and “profit—companies should not be making profit out of illness.”

Of course, profit is exactly the reason why drug companies seek to foster patient-industry partnerships. Mills says that “disease awareness” campaigns often result in “a large increase in sales.” A good example, he says, is “Zeneca, which was responsible for the creation and sponsorship of ‘Breast Awareness Week.’ It would be reasonable to assume that the programme also did nothing to harm sales of tamoxifen either!” Now Breast Cancer Awareness Month (BCAM) events every October raise huge amounts of money for breast cancer research.

Some breast cancer activists are wary of industry’s embrace. Barbara Brenner, the executive director of Breast Cancer Action, believes drug company sponsorship of breast cancer awareness has skewed the priorities of some groups into researching a medical “cure” and away from real preventative measures—such as reducing environmental exposure to pesticides. “Real prevention . . . means we figure out what is causing illness and we eradicate those causes. You don’t hear BCAM saying that,” she said.

Brenner points to the dual role of drug companies manufacturing both breast cancer drugs and pesticides as one reason for the silence about non-drug prevention. Aventis, for example, manufactures Bromoxynil for use on genetically modified cotton. Up until October 2000,

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Zeneca manufactured the pesticide Acetochlor, which generated annual sales of up to \$300 million.

## WINNERS AND LOSERS

Partnerships between drug companies and non-profit groups are now touted as “win-win” deals, but the reality is that consumers of drugs have quite a bit to lose. Salli Nathan edited *Blood Ties*, a book about the experiences of HIV-positive women in Australia. She believes media hype about HIV drugs exaggerated benefits and understated the “really toxic” side effects. “Each new wave of drugs—especially through the mid- to late 1980s and early 1990s—has been greeted with a huge waves of optimism and enthusiasm, with good cause. But then there has been disillusionment and distress when the drugs haven’t been the cure that the hype had lead people to expect,” she stated.

Drug companies also view partnerships with patient groups as a way to gain a competitive advantage over rivals. Dekonor and Taylor candidly acknowledge that drug companies “may be reluctant” to help partners gain “accelerated access to the next generation of treatments (i.e., in a competitor’s pipeline).”

When a PR crisis emerges, such as withdrawal of drug approval, companies seek to turn third-party “partners” into corporate shields. A key task in a crisis is to “deploy third parties to advance your cause,” explained Maxine Taylor, the Director of Corporate Affairs at Lilly UK. Third parties should be called on, she suggested, “to share the spotlight if possible, or indeed to divert the spotlight of media attention from you.”

## WYETH’S WOMEN

One possible example of this strategy occurred in July 2002 when the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) announced that it was abandoning its study of the effects of Prempro, Wyeth’s market-leading hormone replacement therapy (HRT) drug. NIH had originally planned an eight-year trial of the drug, but it only took five years to accumulate conclusive evidence of increased health damage to women who use the drug over time. The announcement was reported with shock in media outlets around the world, which had long been accustomed to glowing reports of HRT.

Women’s health and consumer groups welcomed the decision, but the announcement precipitated a crisis for Wyeth, which had a 70% share of the HRT market and earned \$900 million annually from sales of the drug. Its share price plummeted, and plaintiff lawyers filed a class-action lawsuit.

Support, however, came from the Washington, DC-based Society for Women’s Health Research (SWHR),

which condemned the NIH decision and distributed op-eds and letters to newspapers around the country. Reporting in *Washington Monthly*, Alicia Mundy noted that Wyeth and other drug companies are represented on the group’s corporate advisory board, but details of the group’s funding remain obscure. “Our attorney says it is confidential information that we don’t distribute,” Mundy was told when she inquired.

The SWHR website notes, however, that Wyeth has been a corporate sponsor of its annual fundraising ball at the Washington Ritz-Carlton. In fact, Wyeth underwrote the entire glitzy affair, which promoted Prempro so enthusiastically that one attendee complained it was “like they were doing an ad for Wyeth.”

## CALLS FOR DISCLOSURE

Prevention First, a coalition of independent women’s health groups, testified before the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in May 2001 about the impact of behind-the-scenes corporate on public discussions of health issues. “The FDA should strengthen its requirement that all those who purport to represent a consumer point of view to the agency disclose whether they receive funding or other assistance from entities with economic interests at stake before they testify before the FDA,” it recommended.

Sharon Batt, a Canadian writer who has been involved in breast cancer groups since the early 1990s, believes that the “corrosive” effect of drug company funding means non-profit groups should be required to disclose potential conflicts of interest in all public communications. “Passive disclosure is clearly inadequate, and public disclosure shouldn’t be left to chance or personal choice,” she said.

In an article for Breast Cancer Action Montreal, Batt also challenges the description of drug company sponsorship of non-profit groups as a “partnership,” pointing out that “a partnership implies equality. The idea of a partnership between a grassroots community organization and the most profitable industry in the globe is patently absurd.”

Discussions of accepting funding from drug companies, she says, often creates divisions within non-profit groups. “There is also a lot of naivete and denial, just as with doctors and researchers who insist they can take whatever funds they want from drug companies and still do impartial work,” she told *PR Watch*. ■

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# Clinically Suppressed

by *Andy Rowell and Bob Burton*

In November 2002, Dr. Nancy Olivieri's six-year nightmare finally came to an end. During those years, she lost her job four times, was sued for \$10 million, and her scientific reputation was dragged through the mud. What had she done wrong? She had told the truth.

Olivieri is a professor of Medicine at the University of Toronto and a physician at the Hospital for Sick Children, where she is an award-winning specialist in the treatment of hereditary blood disorders, especially thalassemia, a haemoglobin disorder.

Patients who receive treatment for thalassemia must endure regular blood transfusions and run the risk of chronic toxicity from too much iron in the blood, called "iron loading." This can affect major organs such as the heart and liver. An effective drug that prevents iron loading would therefore offer substantial benefits to the thousands who suffer from the disease.

In the early 1990s, Olivieri wanted to continue studying a promising drug called deferiprone, which appeared to reduce iron loading in transfusion-dependent patients. To fund the research, Olivieri and her co-workers obtained corporate sponsorship from Apotex, Canada's largest domestically-owned pharmaceutical company. This in turn brought matching funding from the Canadian Medical Research Council. At the time, Apotex also happened to be in the middle of complex negotiations with the Olivieri's university about a \$30 million financial donation, the largest in the university's history.

Olivieri signed two contracts continuing an already existing trial and the start of a completely new one. However, Apotex had the right to withdraw funding at any time, and the contract for continuation of the existing trial also gave Apotex the right to control communication of the drug trial data for a year after the trial finished.

By 1995 Olivieri and her co-collaborator, Dr. Gideon Koren had identified an unexpected risk: in 6 of 21 patients studied, tissue iron burdens were higher than expected. Crucially this meant that the drug lost effectiveness over time. By early 1996, the number of patients with high iron burdens had doubled to 12.

This was not the outcome Olivieri had wanted. To the contrary, she had spent years hoping the drug would work. Nevertheless, she felt an obligation to inform patients in the clinical trials that there was a problem. In accordance with the Hospital's Ethics Board, she told Apotex of this decision. Apotex disagreed. The company did "agree that some patients [were] responding inadequately," but stated that the trials should continue and wanted "no further action."

When Olivieri went ahead and informed her patients in May 1996, the company reacted swiftly and severely. An investigation by the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) found that, in response, Apotex, showed "disregard for the interests and concerns of patients when without notice, it terminated both trials and stopped supplying the drug." Apotex also warned that it would "vigorously pursue all legal remedies," if Olivieri spoke to her patients or published anything.

According to the CAUT: "Apotex acted against the public interest in issuing legal warnings to Dr. Olivieri to deter her from communicating about risks" of the drug trials. The company would subsequently deny ever having written any threat.

Showing just how intertwined corporate and public research had become, the person who terminated the trials was Apotex Vice-president Dr. Michael Spino, who had been a full-time member of the University of Toronto Faculty of Pharmacy from 1975-1992, at which time he left to join Apotex. However, Spino still held a "status" professorship at the University.

By February 1997, Olivieri was worried that she had discovered a further unexpected, but potentially far more serious problem with the drug. She became concerned that it might cause liver fibrosis, findings that were backed up by other scientists working in England. Working with colleagues she drafted a report for regulatory warning of this "severe adverse reaction."

Meanwhile, the drug company began efforts to convince the regulatory authorities, patients, the hospital and the wider scientific community that the drug was safe, while privately proposing to change the testing procedure to remove vital tests. They wrote to Olivieri warning that her results were not "not scientifically valid" and threatened their "business."

Throughout this three-year ordeal, Olivieri received no support from the Hospital for Sick Children or the University of Toronto. At the beginning of 1999, she was dismissed from her post as director of its hemoglobinopathy program. She and some of her close colleagues were later gagged by the Hospital for Sick Children. After mediation, she was reinstated and allowed to continue research in late January 1999. The hospital also belatedly promised to support her financially if Apotex sued her.

By 2000, the increasingly bitter feud had reached the courts. Olivieri sued Apotex for libel after the company accused her of making "false" statements. Apotex filed a counterclaim against Olivieri, asking for \$10 million damages. Various different committees and inquiries were also held into the whole saga.

## CHANDLER CHICCO FILLS THE NEWS HOLE

“The best marketing, and the cheapest, is editorial,” explains the “Practical Guide to Medical Education,” a how-to guide published in 2001 by *Pharmaceutical Marketing*, a British trade magazine. By “editorial,” it means the news section of publications, as distinct from the advertisements where readers *expect* to encounter marketing. As the “Practical Guide” candidly admits, “Readers believe claims made in editorial section far more than claims made in an advert, the most expensive way into a publication.”

In Lynn Payer’s 1994 book, *Disease Mongering*, she recounted her own experiences as a reporter for *Rheumatology News*, a publication that was funded by Syntex pharmaceuticals. Formally, the publication had editorial independence, but Payer stated that on a number of occasions she was asked to cover “supposedly as a journalist” conferences sponsored by Syntex “at which investigators whose work had been sponsored by Syntex would be reporting their results.”

“An even more questionable practice,” Payer wrote, “is to be paid by a company to place an article as if you were an independent journalist.” It was common practice, she wrote, for companies to look for opportunities to do this to ensure upbeat reporting of trial results and new drugs that may impress doctors or consumers.

The PR firms that specialize in promotional publicity for pharmaceutical companies rarely talk publicly

about these sorts of practices. In August 2001, however, the Chandler Chicco Agency (CCA), one of the largest medical PR firms, with offices in New York and London, placed an advertisement with the “jobs available” list of the U.S. National Association of Science Writers (NASW).

Written by CCA’s Brynn Thomas, the ad sought a freelance journalist to cover an conference of the European Association for the Study of Diabetes (EASD) in Glasgow, Scotland. The ad stated that candidates for the job would be expected to “guarantee 2-4 placements in medical trade publications targeting general practitioners and/or diabetes specialists.” It went on to say that all travel and out-of-pocket expenses would be covered, as long as the freelancer provided details of their availability, fee and media contacts. Not only would the journalist collect the daily fees—which some freelancers estimate can be as much as \$1000 per day plus \$100 per hour for writing and placing the stories—they would also pocket any fees from the publications in which the articles appeared.

Chandler did not respond to questions from *PR Watch* requesting details such as the identity of CCA’s client. When asked if the freelancer would be required to disclose the source of their sponsorship to editors, Chandler replied only that “We would expect the freelance journalist, and the publications for which they write, to publish only what they see as legitimate news.”

In January 2002, the CAUT published a supplement to its investigation, concluding that Dr. Olivieri had been exonerated by their inquiry and three others, including an inquiry conducted by the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Toronto. “Unless the lessons are learned,” wrote the CAUT, “everyone will lose. It is important to recognize that the circumstances that gave rise to this case are not isolated—they illustrate a system-wide problem.”

In November 2002, a settlement was reached that “resolved all outstanding litigation and arbitrations pending between all the parties.” But Olivieri’s case may only be the tip of the iceberg.

The *British Medical Journal (BMJ)* has warned about the “proliferation of stories of companies suppressing publication.” A month before the Olivieri settlement, a paper in the *New England Journal of Medicine* concluded that universities “routinely” engage in lucrative industry-sponsored research that restricts academic freedom.

Dr. Kevin Schulman from Duke University Medical Center found that “academic institutions rarely ensure that their investigators have full participation in design

of trials, unimpeded access to trial data, and the right to publish their findings.” Schulman’s team surveyed more than 100 medical centers in the US and found that only one percent involved in multi-center studies had independent access to all trial data.

In March 2001, the *BMJ* revelations that the Wyeth pharmaceutical company had “shelved” a study of its contraceptive pills that indicated “clear increases in the risk of developing deep venous thrombosis.” Although Wyeth provided the data to regulatory authorities, it did not submit it for publication as “the study did not offer any new scientific information.”

Six months later the *BMJ* editorialised about problems that have arisen due to the “entanglement” of academia with industry, noting that “control lies in the commercial rather than in the academic or public sector.” Methods used by industry included designing “studies likely to favour their products” and analysing data “providing the spin—that favours them.”

This entanglement worries Olivieri deeply. “Commercialisation of university research,” she says “benefits companies at the expense of the public good.” ■



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# RISING RHETORIC ON GENETICALLY MODIFIED CROPS

by *Andy Rowell and Bob Burton*

“Their level of desperation appears to be increasing,” says Michael Hansen, a scientist with Consumers Union in the US, who monitors the activities of the biotech industry as it lobbies for acceptance of genetically modified (GM) foods. Hansen has watched with increasing alarm as the pro-GM lobby escalates its vitriolic attacks on critics.

Over the next few months we will witness the final end game by biotech proponents to gain acceptance for GM. The pro-biotech industry has accused its critics of fundamentalism and of hijacking the GM debate to further their own political and trade interests. In reality, the pro-GM lobby is using these very tactics itself.

The biotech industry is relying heavily on third parties to push its message, including US and British officials, corporate front groups, a carefully selected group of farmers from developing nations, and a loose coalition that includes rightwing think tanks and even a few ex-Marxists turned libertarians.

For a year, the pro-biotech Bush administration has been trying to isolate Europe over its moratorium on GM foods. In August of last year, it seized a golden opportunity to demonize GM-opponents during the famine in Africa. The US refused to supply the World Food Programme with GM-free maize, despite the presence of hundreds of thousands of tons available in the US and elsewhere. However, the GM maize encountered considerable African resistance, and Zambia refused to accept it.

In an attack that now appears to be part of a well-planned strategy, Andrew Natsios of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) argued that environmental and consumer groups were “killing millions of poor people in southern Africa through their ideological campaign.” GM was peddled as a “life-saving technology.”

In the United Kingdom, the organization Cropgen serves as a front group for corporate biotech interests, often coordinating its activities with EuropaBio, which plays a similar role on a Europe-wide basis. In January, EuropaBio brought ten “representatives” from developing countries to deliver their favorable perspective on biotech to the EU. Three of the representatives traveled to London to give a press conference for Cropgen on the “need for biotechnology for their continent.”

Last year Monsanto flew T. Buthelezi, a pro-biotech African farmer, 300 miles to meet US Trade Representative Robert Zoellick in South Africa. In the last two years, Zoellick has met every African trade Minister in a bid to gain acceptance for GM and isolate the EU. He tells them not to listen to Western environmentalists, dis-

missing them as Luddites: “It’s equivalent to that period when people were opposed to machines.”

Pro-GM forces also took advantage of the World Summit on Sustainable Development that was held in Johannesburg, South Africa in August. During the WSSD, black farmers (including the ubiquitous T. Buthelezi) marched to defend their “right” to grow GM crops. Val Giddings of the Biotechnology Industry Association described their march as a “turning point” in the GM debate, as “for the first time, we saw significant numbers of real, live, developing-world farmers who have grown crops improved through biotechnology speaking for themselves.”

In reality, many of the marchers were not even farmers, and the press contact for the march was Kendra Okonski, an American who works as a co-ordinator for the International Policy Network (IPN) and as a spokesperson for the Sustainable Development Network (SDN) in London.

## STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Despite their green-sounding names, the IPN and SDN are actually coalitions of libertarian and right wing think tanks across the globe, such as the rabidly pro-biotech AgBioWorld Foundation, based in the United States. The directors of the IPN are Roger Bate and Julian Morris, who have a history of dismissing environmentalism, organic agriculture and climate change. Bate and Morris work for the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), a right-wing think tank based in London. Bate is also a fellow at the Washington-based Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI), a leading anti-environmental think tank, where Kendra Okonski also used to work.

During the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, Okonski wrote an article for the TechCentralStation web site, stating that “Africans are sacrificed on the altar of trendy green delusions.” TechCentralStation, whose funding comes from companies including ExxonMobil, AT&T, Microsoft, and General Motors, calls itself a web site “where freemarkets meet technology.” Its European web site lists a dozen affiliated think tanks, including the IPN, the IEA, the Scientific Alliance and the Institute of Ideas in the UK—an odd mixture of libertarian, ex-Marxist, pro-corporate and anti-environmental think tanks.

The Scientific Alliance claims to be an independent, impartial voice that wants to offer a rational, scientific approach to environmental issues, but actually it is a corporate front group, led by quarryman Robert Durward, the director of the British Aggregates Association.

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The Institute of Ideas (IoI) is run by Claire Fox, who previously published *Living Marxism* magazine. Fox's thinking is in line with the old-line Marxist school of thought that promotes technologies such as nuclear power and GM. *Living Marxism* had a history of attacking the environmental movement as "Luddites," and its associates were behind a TV series called "Against Nature" that ran on BBC's Channel 4 in the late 1990s. The British Independent Television Commission later ruled the programme makers had "distorted" the views of interviewees and "misled" participants over the "content and purpose of the programmes when they agreed to take part."

Frank Furedi, a professor of sociology at Kent University and a leading figure in the contemporary Marxist movement in the UK, has also worked with the IoI and its sister publication, *Spiked* magazine, which is run by Mick Hume and Helene Guldberg, both former editors at *Living Marxism*.

## HUNGRY FOR THE TRUTH

Last December, with Zambia still refusing to accept GM food, the US upped the stakes. Tony Hall, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, claimed that "people that deny food to their people, that are in fact starving people to death should be held responsible for the highest crimes against humanity in the highest courts in the world." His words, aimed at the Zambians, provoked a furious reaction from organisations in over 30 countries, accusing him of promoting an "abusive" US foreign policy.

In January 2003, US trade representative Robert Zoellick claimed that European Union governments had threatened to withdraw aid from poor countries that accepted GM food products. Poul Nielson, the EU Development Commissioner, retorted by offering a deal: "If the Americans would stop lying about us, we would stop telling the truth about them."

Meanwhile in the UK, as the government finalized the details of an official "public debate" on GM foods, the pro-biotech lobby sprang into action. First came a conference organized by the Scientific Alliance called "Fields of the Future." GeneWatch UK was invited to co-organize but refused, citing the Alliance's anti-green bias. (GeneWatch later organized an alternative conference in co-operation with the *Guardian* newspaper and other sponsors.)

The chair of the Scientific Alliance conference was Lord Taverne, who chairs Sense about Science, an organization that works closely with the British Royal Society on contentious issues such as scientific "peer review." Sense about Science says its role is to "encourage a ratio-

nal, evidence-based approach to scientific and technological developments." Funded by learned societies and companies such as Halifax, Unilever and GlaxoSmithKline, it has an executive committee that includes a number of distinguished scientists.

The director of Sense about Science, however, is Tracey Brown, who used to work for a crisis and risk management PR company called Register Larkin, whose client list includes pharmaceutical, oil and biotech companies, including Aventis, Bayer, Lilly, Pfizer and the Bio Industry Association. Brown is also involved in the charity Global Futures, whose contact number is the same as Sense About Science and whose contact person is Ellen Raphael, a Register Larkin employee.

Through Global Futures, Brown is also connected to the ex-Marxist clique at the Institute of Ideas. She is the co-author of a book published by IoI, and the domain name for the web site of IoI's *Spiked* magazine is registered to Global Futures trustee Phil Mullan. Also, Frank Furedi is the author of the only publication on Global Futures' own web site.

IoI, in association with Pfizer, is sponsoring a weekend-long "Genes and Society Festival" in London in April that coincides with the 50th anniversary of the discover of DNA. The festival is being organised by the IoI's Tony Gilland, who believes that the UK "farm-scale trials are an unnecessary obstacle" to the introduction of "beneficial and benign" GM technology.

*Spiked* is also running seminars on GM. The latest, titled "GM food: should labelling be mandatory?" will be held in April at the London headquarters of PR firm Hill & Knowlton, in association with the International Policy Network. Consumer groups are boycotting it.

## BIOTECH FOR THE BIRDS

In addition to think tanks and seminars, the pro-biotech lobby has a strong reservoir of support from within the scientific community, thanks in part to the role that industry plays as a major source of biotech research funding. The scientists who study biotech are inclined to support its development for the same reason that workers at a Lockheed Martin plant are likely to support military spending: their jobs are on the line.

The British Royal Society, England's leading scientific body, ostensibly dedicates itself to upholding high standards for scientific research, but it has employed a disturbing double standard with regard to biotechnology. The RS issued an entire report damning alleged insufficiencies in Arpad Pusztai's controversial research linking genetically modified potatoes to adverse health effects in rats. Prominent RS members, including then-president Sir Aaron Klug, vigorously opposed the pub-

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lication of Pusztai's research. Lord Robert May, then the government's chief scientist who serves as the society's current president, called his work "garbage" and accused him of "violating every canon of scientific rectitude."

In January, by contrast, the Royal Society rolled out the red carpet to publicize research that purported to finally show ecological benefits of genetically modified crops. The research, funded in part by Monsanto, was conducted at Broom Barn, a government-affiliated research center with biotech commercial partners. The Royal Society celebrated the research in a news release claiming that GM crops "could bring back increasing numbers of endangered wildlife and birds such as skylarks and finches."

In the UK, more than a million people contribute financially to bird conservation. From a PR perspective, therefore, the bird angle "is a nice one. That is what everybody wants to happen, isn't it?" says Elaine Calvert, the freelance press officer who wrote the Royal Society news release. The biotech industry has been looking for a bird angle since at least February 2002, when this emerged as one of the key recommendations of the Agricultural Biotechnology Council (ABC), a lobby group

funded by Monsanto, Bayer CropScience, BASF, Dow Agrosciences, Dupont and Syngenta, with support from the PR firms Weber Shandwick and Lexington Communications.

Broom Barn and the Royal Society briefed science correspondents, prompting a story in the *Guardian* headlined, "Scientists grow 'bird-friendly' GM sugar beet." A similar report in the *Independent* stated, "Insects and farmland birds can flourish in GM fields that under conventional farming would be wildlife deserts." Lord Taverne gave a presentation on the bird-friendly news to the House of Lords and members of parliament.

Actually, the Broom Barn scientists had not even looked at birds. "The trial plots were not big enough to look at birds," concedes lead scientist Alan Dewar. "The bird angle isn't conclusive."

"Considering the way in which the RS and scientific establishment have attacked the quality of the science that questions the safety of GM, it is quite extraordinary that they should promote this piece of science," says Dr Sue Mayer from GeneWatch UK. "The only conclusion I can come to is that they have some other motivation and that they are not evaluating science fairly." ■

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## WEAPONS OF MASS DECEPTION

by Sheldon Rampton; excerpted from *Disinfopedia* ([www.disinfopedia.org](http://www.disinfopedia.org))

Led into war by President George W. Bush, nearly 300,000 U.S. soldiers—many of whom no doubt sincerely believe that they are helping to make the world a better, safer place for themselves and their loved ones—are about to risk their lives. Outside the United States, however, few people believe this.

Most of Europe, the majority of the Arab world, and indeed most nations on earth have been warning that a U.S. invasion of Iraq will increase the likelihood of domestic and international terrorism. Remarkably, in the face of these warnings, few international viewpoints penetrate the major U.S. media or other institutions that hold themselves responsible for informing public opinion.

### ENSURING CONSISTENCY

In January 2003, the Bush administration signed an executive order creating an Office of Global Communications (OGC), whose mission is to "ensure consistency in messages that will promote the interests of the United States abroad, prevent misunderstanding, build support for and among coalition partners of the United States, and inform international audiences." To achieve this goal, the OGC sponsors a "Global Messenger" e-mail of talking points sent daily to administration officials,

U.S. embassies, Congress and others. It is also organizing daily telephone conference calls to coordinate foreign policy messages among U.S. government agencies and representatives of British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

These activities may sound innocuous. The idea of "ensuring consistency" is a cardinal rule of PR crisis communications, whose practitioners try whenever possible to make sure that all messages flow through a single, controlling channel. In practice, however, ensuring consistency leads to a concerted effort to enforce a "party line" on all messages emanating from the U.S. government, effectively silencing officials whose point of view contradicts the official institutional message.

The administration's obsession with "staying on message" is also reflected in its reluctance to hold press conferences and its insistence on tightly scripting those few conferences it does allow. Journalist Russell Mokhiber, who attended Bush's March 6, 2003 news conference, says it "might have been the most controlled Presidential news conference in recent memory. Even the President admitted during the press conference that 'this is a scripted' press conference. The President had a list of 17 reporters who he was going to call on. He didn't

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take any questions from reporters raising their hands.” White House communications director Dan Bartlett explained, “If you have a message you’re trying to deliver, a news conference can go in a different direction.” However, “In this case, we know what the questions are going to be, and those are the ones we want to answer.”

All of these plans fall within the framework of a “propaganda model” of communication, whose strategies and assumptions are fundamentally contrary to a democratic model. Some scholars refer to propaganda as a “hypodermic approach” to communication, in which the communicator’s objective is to “inject” his ideas into the minds of a “target population.” This is quite different from the democratic model, which views communications as a dialogue between presumed equals. The goal of the propaganda model is simply to achieve efficient indoctrination, and it therefore tends to regard the assumptions of the democratic model as inconvenient obstacles to efficient communication.

In reality, it is impossible to “ensure consistency” and control the channels of communications on an international scale, and glaring contradictions are already evident in the Bush administration’s message strategy.

### THE WORLD’S BIGGEST FOCUS GROUP

The first contradiction comes when the Bush administration tries to counter the growing worldwide perception of the United States as an arrogant nation while simultaneously refusing to listen to its critics. Donald Rumsfeld’s dismissal of France and Germany as “old Europe” is only one recent example. The same pattern was also evident following February 15, 2003, when more than 11 million people protested in cities throughout the world to oppose an invasion of Iraq. Bush airily dismissed the protests, saying that he doesn’t “decide policy based upon a focus group.”

Bush’s statement speaks volumes about his inability to think outside the framework of a propaganda model of communication. There is a world of difference between a focus group and a mass citizen protest (which attracted 500,000 people in New York alone, and more than a million in London).

The claim that Bush doesn’t rely on focus groups is also spin. Writing in the *Washington Monthly* in April 2002, Joshua Green noted that “the Bush administration is a frequent consumer of polls, though it takes extraordinary measures to appear that it isn’t.” In 2001, the administration spent close to \$1 million for polling, using political advisors like Jan van Lohuizen and his focus-group guru, Fred Steeper. “Policies are chosen beforehand, polls used to spin them,” Green wrote. “Because

many of Bush’s policies aren’t necessarily popular with a majority of voters, Steeper and van Lohuizen’s job essentially consists of finding words to sell them to the public.”

Polling is also being used to sell the U.S. abroad. In May 2002, Franklin Foer reported in *The New Republic* that the Rendon Group, one of the Pentagon’s PR firms, “monitors Muslim opinion with polls and focus groups, and then it generates plans for influencing it.”

Charlotte Beers, the former advertising executive who recently resigned her position as U.S. Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy, also used focus groups. Testifying before Congress in April 2002, Beers promised to “increase polling . . . in Muslim countries and communities to provide policymakers with information on foreign publics’ attitudes, perceptions, and opinions so public diplomacy messages can be more effectively targeted. . . . These surveys will include regular polls in Afghanistan and in Muslim-majority countries to track public opinion over time.” She went on to enumerate plans to conduct polling in Africa, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Latin America, Europe and Russia.

The real problem with the Bush administration is that it doesn’t listen to anything *but* focus groups. It never thinks of public opinion as worth considering in its own right, and instead merely uses it to refine the message points that go out each day in its “Global Messenger” e-mails.

### THE POWER OF PROPAGANDA

*PR Watch* has frequently reported on manipulative propaganda practices of governments and corporations. One of propaganda’s dirtiest secrets, however, is that it often fails to influence the “hearts and minds” of its “target audiences.” The Bush administration has failed at persuading the Arab world to support its policies toward Iraq. It has failed also in Europe and throughout the rest of the world, and its hold on public opinion in the United States is shaky at best.

Propaganda is often more successful at indoctrinating the propagandists themselves than it is at influencing the thinking of others. The discipline of “ensuring message consistency” cannot hope to succeed at controlling the world’s perceptions of something as broad, sprawling, and contradictory as the Bush administration’s foreign policy. However, it may be successful at enabling people like George W. Bush and Donald Rumsfeld to ignore the warnings coming from Europe and other quarters. As our leaders lose their ability to listen to critics, we face the danger that they will underestimate the risks and costs involved in going to war. ■