The Science and Politics of a Disinvitation

Hans Weill is professor of medicine at Tulane University in New Orleans. He is an authority on occupational lung disease, and last year served as president of the American Thoracic Society.

A few weeks ago, on 10 July, Weill was asked by the National Cancer Institute to cochair a conference on lung cancer surveillance. Ten days later, the NCI called again and disinvited him.

No big deal in that, but the story of Weill's disinvitation says something about the perennially mysterious way in which people form opinions of one another.

Margaret Sloan, of the NCI's Division of Cancer Control and Rehabilitation, asked Weill to cochair the conference because he had been recommended to her as one of the leading pulmonary disease specialists in the country. But when she called to disinvite him, she gave as the reason objections raised by "representatives of organized labor."

Weill didn't mind too much not chairing the conference, but he was highly vexed by Sloan's explanation. The NCI, it seemed to him, was publicly endorsing a charge of bias without giving him the opportunity to refute it. True, he consults for industry, but he also consults for unions, for workmen seeking compensation, and for the federal government. He objects, he says, to the pigeonholing mentality which holds that anyone who consults for industry must be inherently biased in industry's favor.

For all these reasons, Weill wrote a letter of vigorous complaint to Sloan, a letter which recently came to *Science*'s attention. Asked what made her go to the length of disinviting Weill, Sloan refused to say who had objected or why. Mightn't the disinvitation damage Weill's reputation? "Oh, I don't think so, I think his reputation is unassailable." Well, was the reason for disinviting him some complaint of lack of impartiality? "Some people think he is more on the industry side than labor's," Sloan remarked. Like who? "I don't think I should report what is more or less gossip." Could she be saying that the NCI had acted on the basis of mere gossip? "There were other considerations," Sloan said, but declined to say what they were. It had not been her decision to disinvite Weill, she added.

Sloan's boss is Diane Fink, director of the Division of Cancer Control and Rehabilitation. Fink's explanations were as baffling as Sloan's. Asked the nature of the evidence for disinviting Weill, Fink stated that "There really is no evidence." Then on what basis did the NCI act? "This was such an innocent business," Fink replied. "There was nothing against Dr. Weill. The only thing I can say is that if there was a sin it was a sin of innocence." But under what pressure had the NCI disinvited Weill. "There was no pressure. This was an off-hand business," Fink insisted, "Just very off-hand." She conceded that "a question had been raised to us, that not everyone might accept the recommendations of the conference if Weill were cochairman." Irving Selikoff of Mount Sinai Hospital was the only person whom she could remember having raised such a question.

Selikoff denied having said that. But he had pointed out to Fink that "Since Weill was a consultant to the Asbestos Information Center, I didn't know if this would enhance or detract from hearing all points of view."

Thus far the question of the disinvitation seemed very puzzling. Weill had been asked to stand down on the basis of what one NCI official called "more or less gossip" and another described as "really no evidence." He had been told of objections from organized labor but neither Sloan nor Fink could recall the name or specific objections raised by any labor official. If this was how NCI officials went about organizing a conference, what could they have in mind for the conquest of cancer?

Matters became slightly less opaque with a call to Sheldon Samuels, health expert for the industrial union members of the AFL-CIO and the most likely source of complaints to the NCI. Yes, he had spoken to Fink about Weill, Samuels said. It was not an official complaint, just a comment. He was not qualified to judge Weill's scientific work but he could judge the political conclusions that could be drawn from it, Samuels said. "Weill is an employee of the Asbestos Information Center and the American Textile Manufacturers' Institute. So when I was asked for an opinion I said I didn't think that Weill would be neutral. Anyone whose income, direct personal income, comes from one side of an issue cannot be perceived to be neutral."

It happens that Weill is also an "employee" of one of the member unions of the AFL-CIO, the Marine Engineers Benevolent Association. Assuming a fee from industry would bias Weill's findings, by the same argument wouldn't a fee from labor serve to neutralize the bias? Samuels said he didn't think Weill got very much money from unions, but allowed as how the AFL-CIO didn't have people moving around the country snooping into Weill's business affairs.

The snoopers, if they existed, would have discovered that Weill gets no income from his consultancy fees, all of which are paid over to his only employer, Tulane University. But regardless of the fine calculus of fees, Samuels had another objection to Weill. This was that Weill "had spent days in testifying for the American Textile Manufacturers Institute on the cotton dust situation."

Weill did testify at hearings to set levels for cotton dust, but not on behalf of the textile manufacturers. He testified as a witness for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in support of OSHA's proposed standards. The source of Samuels' confusion was probably that aspects of Weill's testimony were criticized by the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union.

A second call to Fink elucidated that she and Sloan did now remember that Samuels had talked to them about Weill. But there seems to have been little attempt to evaluate the merit or otherwise of Samuels' comments. "We love Dr. Weill quite as much as we did before. I know nothing negative about him," said Fink. The conference had to be put together hurriedly, and occupational lung disease was not a field that she and Sloan knew well, she added.

What if the NCI had told Samuels that his comments were not sufficient grounds to disinvite Weill; would labor still have attended the conference? "Of course. What, are we children?" says Samuels.

Decisions such as those made by the NCI in inviting and disinviting Weill are made by the thousand every day. But in asking Weill to stand down, it seems that the NCI neglected to evaluate the opinions offered to it. An easy trap to fall into, but that is the way that prejudices become the basis for action.—NICHOLAS WADE

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