LETTERS

NCI Disinvitation

With surprise I read "The science and politics of a disinvitation" by Nicholas Wade (News and Comment, 8 Sept., p. 892). Most of the information that I provided to Wade in his brief telephone interview with me was left out of the article or distorted. More important, essential information from other sources apparently was not gathered. The facts support our conclusion that the National Cancer Institute's (NCI's) disinvitation of Hans Weill as chairman of a conference on lung cancer was warranted. I do not suffer from "confusion" about Weill's testimony on cotton dust standards as alleged by Wade.

Nothing in the article reflects the nature of the conference, an understanding of which would convert the portrayal of NCI officials Sloane and Fink as characters easily manipulated by "organized labor" to that of responsible civil servants. The meeting in question (held 18 to 20 September) was titled "Consensus Conference on Screening for Lung Cancer." It was an attempt to develop a state-of-the-art *consensus* on key problems of detection and intervention in high-risk populations.

Given the additional facts that 20 to 25 percent of surveyed workers exposed to occupational carcinogens such as asbestos die of lung cancer (*1*), that law suits against the industry soon may exceed the $1.5 billion net worth of the primary miner and processor of asbestos products (Johns-Manville), that a South Carolina court has reopened a key case because new evidence (in the words of the court) "reflects a conscious effort by the industry in the 1930's to downplay, or arguably suppress, the dissemination of information" (*2*), and that an effective screening program will result in additional litigation, a neutral chairman was correctly seen by NCI as essential to the credibility of the conference consensus.

Whether or not Weill is indeed a neutral authority, to many in labor, the environmental movement, and public interest organizations he is perceived as simply one more academic representative of the views of those who peddle carcinogens and other toxic agents. Based on the fact of this perception, the NCI action was appropriate. Weill was not excluded from the meeting. He was kept on the planning committee. Not surprisingly, he chose not to attend the meeting.

As Wade asserts, Weill had been asked to testify by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) on the portion of the proposed cotton dust standard related to pulmonary function testing. He did not restrict his testimony to pulmonary function testing but presented a study he conducted for the American Textile Manufacturers Council, which was then used as evidence by the industry and the Southern Governors Council to contest the OSHA cotton dust standard.

Beyond the issue of Weill's neutrality as a scientist is the question of the political judgments implicit in the science of his work.

One does not have to be expert in the medical arts of spirometry or radiography to understand that the use of these techniques in extreme risk, involuntary human experiments is not a medical decision. It is political. Data gathered by this or any means can be extrapolated for use in standards development, but the requirements of a standard are political conclusions, the premises of which are not wholly drawn from scientific data. I reserve the right to judge whether such political decisions and conclusions are in the interests of the workers or the employers, while pleading inability to measure lung capacity or read x-rays.

The continuing political decision to conduct massive, scientifically unnecessary, and morally unjustifiable human experiments does not make them acceptable, nor are those who practice their profession in this vein correctly seen as "neutral." They are our adversaries in our struggle to end these practices.

Weill's propensity for such experiments is a matter of public record. A telephone call, such as I made on 8 September, to the Asbestos Information Association (AIA) would have elicited the information that AIA had "contracted with him" (quoting executive director Robert Mereness) for the development of an attack (*3*) on the proposal by OSHA to reduce the current asbestos standard of 2 fibers per cubic centimeter to 0.5 fiber. The proposal was spurred by a lawsuit brought by our department in the early days of OSHA.

The conclusion of this attack is that the current standard "should be given a reasonable trial while further epidemiologic investigation establishes its safety or lack of it" (*4*). Weill rejects the alternative that (to quote him) "since a safe threshold level of exposure can not be scientifically proven at this time, the standard must require that all exposures be at or below the lowest technologically feasible level" (*4*).

It was the National Heart and Lung Institute (NHLI) that recommended to NCI that Weill would be a suitable chairman for the NCI lung cancer consensus conference. And it is NHLI which is currently matching funds with the Quebec Asbestos Mining Association to finance Weill's quest for a "rational" asbestos standard. The paramount moral issues of such government-supported "research," and the use of taxes to support research of questionable scientific value, but of unquestionable commercial value to industry, warrants investigation.

Science's interest in these issues should be expressed by an inquiry into the violation of the human rights of millions of workers continually subjected to ideologically motivated experiments in the name of "science."

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References

1. "Draft summary: Estimates of the fraction of cancer incidence in the United States attributable to occupational factors" (prepared by the National Cancer Institute-National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences for the Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Washington, D.C., 11 September 1978).
2. Barnett *v*. Owens Corning *et al*. (Order, 13th Judic. Cir. Ct., S.C., 24 August 1978).
3. "Submission of the Asbestos Information Association on proposed revision to the OSHA asbestos standard" (Docket No. H-033, Docket Office, OSHA, 8 April 1976).
4. H. Weill, *ibid.*, p. 24.

As our union—the Marine Engineers' Beneficial Association (MEBA)—is mentioned in Wade's article of 8 September about the "disinvitation" of the National Cancer Institute to Hans Weill to cochair a lung cancer conference, perhaps it would be appropriate to express our views about the fine work performed by Weill for the members of our organization.

Weill was never, of course, an employee—even in quotation marks, as Wade uses them—of MEBA, a union which represents the several thousand marine engineers employed on the U.S. merchant and tanker fleets. At the request of our Diagnostic Clinic for the Port of New Orleans, MEBA arranged with the Tulane Medical School for a study of the lung x-rays of a considerable number of our members. It was Weill, by painstaking analysis, who detected the presence of possible asbestosis in a number of the photographs, alerting the individuals concerned and their union to the hazards of free-floating asbestos fibers in the vibrating environment of a typical ship's engine room.

We in MEBA were particularly impressed with Weill's diagnosis because marine engineers have been treated in the various U.S. Marine hospitals for

decades without a similarly significant finding ever having been made. Nor has the Coast Guard, with its substantial appropriations and its general jurisdiction over many aspects of the Merchant Marine, ever brought the asbestos problem to our attention.

As a result of Weill's work, MEBA has been alerting engineers to the necessity of coping with the dangers from asbestos in the engine rooms. We have, in addition, instituted a vigorous program of covering up asbestos overlays around the engine rooms, and of removing all excess asbestos material to properly controlled storage space at shore locations.

What concerns me about the article is that some of our members might mistakenly assume that Weill is some kind of a corporate medical apologist. That was certainly not the case in his work on the research performed by MEBA, which conformed to the best traditions of the medical profession.

It may be that some union people, some members of the medical profession, and some officials of agencies and institutes feel that Weill is company-oriented and not neutral. MEBA found him both professionally skillful and biased only against the spread of asbestos and related lung infections, for which we are grateful.

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Marsupials in the Lab

It is good news that there is increasing interest in the laboratory potential of marsupials—including the opossums which Jurgelski has been rearing at Research Triangle Park for several years (News and Comment, 29 Sept., p. 1194).

I have long hoped that the breeding difficulties with the mouse opossum (*Marmosa mitis*) of northern Colombia might be overcome so that this little animal could replace the rat in testing of orally administered plant materials suspected of carcinogenicity in humans.

In 1971 I provided a female *Marmosa mitis* for examination by the Chilean pathologist Robert Zaldívar. After a histologic study, he wrote me that "The stomach is totally lined by a glandular epithelium, similarly to man. Therefore, this species may be used for studying the sensitivity of such epithelium to known strong and weak chemical carcinogens. In addition, this animal has a convenient size."