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EDITORIAL

A Cautionary Tale

On the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ)* of 25 April 1996, staff reporter Ralph T. King Jr. revealed in a lengthy, meticulously documented article that when the pharmaceutical company Boots provided money for a basic research project at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), but did not like the results, Boots forced the authors to retract a report of the results that was to have appeared in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) and brought the university to its knees with threats of a protracted lawsuit. The university, at first supportive of the researchers, caved in and accepted the cancellation of the report, leaving the researchers to defend themselves. They too capitulated. This entire episode is damaging to everyone involved, and it highlights the potential pitfalls of corporate-funded university research when the results are antithetical to the interests of the funder. How many universities, desperate for research funds, will be able to withstand the increasingly tough bargains being driven by some corporations? And how long will corporations that are committed to funding genuinely basic research projects be willing to do so if their motives are tarnished by the fallout from incidents such as the above?

Boots had asked Dr. Betty Dong at UCSF to determine whether its relatively expensive drug Synthroid was biologically equivalent to the inexpensive generic form of the compound. Synthroid is taken daily by 8 million people to correct hypothyroidism, and its share of the market is worth \$600 million per year. Dong's team found to Boots' consternation that the compounds were interchangeable. The results were vetted by five peer reviewers and accepted for publication by JAMA. According to the WSJ, adoption of the generic compound on a large scale could cut U.S. health care costs by \$356 million per year. The fight was on. Boots inflicted a fatal wound by demonstrating that Dong had ignored a clause in the 21-page research contract stating that "the study results were not to be published or otherwise released without the written consent" of Boots. Dong had also neglected to have the contract vetted by the university—a major oversight. Many universities accept 90-day delays in publication of results, so that the sponsor can search them for potential products. In this instance, UCSF's policy would not have allowed the contract to be signed.

This incident is a morality play for our times, although it lacks a genuine heroine or hero. Dong might have been more suspicious; when \$600 million is at stake, there is at least a scintilla of doubt about a corporation's commitment to basic science. In addition, it appears that Dong did not know (or chose to overlook) the rules of the game. She did, however, pursue her attempts to have the results published and did not succumb to pressure to retract them lest she jeopardize future research support. The potential hero, the university's president or governing board, although originally supportive of the right to publish, backed down when faced with the prospect of a massive lawsuit. The victim is obvious: the university. Each infringement on its unwritten contract with society to avoid secrecy whenever possible and maintain its independence from government or corporate pressure weakens its integrity.

The former president of Harvard, Derek C. Bok, whose tenure coincided with a leap in corporate funding for universities as well as in the entrepreneurial activity of academic scientists, was convinced that academic scientists had established an ethic that would both protect the openness of the universities and allow them to receive corporate funds. Now that such funding has doubled from 4 to 7% of overall university research, he is no longer quite so certain that the ethic survives intact. At a recent seminar on university-industry relations, Bok said ruefully that "the price of corporate support is eternal vigilance."

The UCSF/Boots morality play gives substance to his warning. Corporations that are considering less-than-disinterested research sponsorship should ponder the long-term consequences of their actions. Universities provide not only research but the culture in which the next generation of corporate scientists is socialized. If faculty compromise the ethical underpinnings of science, the values their graduates will bring to industry will not be those on which to base either a first-rate research laboratory or a solid corporate culture. The WSJ has sounded an early warning call; a call that comes none too soon.

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*"How a Drug Firm Paid for University Study, Then Undermined It," *WSJ*, 25 April 1996, p. 1.