

Federal committee to review appointment of Pfizer vice-president to CIHR governing council

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The parliamentary health committee will review the government appointment of a Pfizer Canada vice-president to the governing council of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR).

“Having drug company executives deciding health research directions is like having the big bad wolf directing the three little pigs on how to build their homes,” committee vice-chair and New Democrat Member of Parliament Judy Wasylycia-Leis (Winnipeg North) said in a news release.

The order-in-council appointment of Dr. Bernard Prigent to the CIHR governing council was announced Oct. 5 by Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq (CMAJ 2009; DOI:10:1503/cmaj.109-3085). The review, approved by the 12-member Commons committee on Nov. 16, is scheduled for Nov. 30.

Prigent’s appointment sparked controversy among some physicians (CMAJ 2009.DOI:10.105.1503/cmaj.109-3085) and concern has mounted among academics and researchers.

The appointment is “very surprising and quite inappropriate,” said Dr. Patricia Baird, university distinguished professor with the department of medical genetics at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

“Many governments, medical journals and health organizations are becoming much more aware of issues of conflict of interest, so for this appointment to be made in this climate, when people are so much more aware, is surprising,” said Baird, who served on the boards of both CIHR’s predecessor, the Medical Research Council of Canada, and the National Advisory Board on Science and Technology.

The appointment “can only open the CIHR itself to suspicions of conflicting interests,” Abby Lippman, professor of epidemiology, biostatistics



Reuters/Francois Lenoir

The appointment of Pfizer Canada Vice-President Dr. Bernard Prigent to the governing council of the Canadian Institutes for Health Research will soon be reviewed by a federal health committee.

and occupational health at McGill University in Montréal, Quebec, wrote in a letter to CIHR President Alain Beaudet.

But Dr. Carolyn Bennett, Liberal MP for the Toronto, Ontario, riding of St Paul's and a member of the health committee, said in an email that she was assured by governing council members that "because part of the mandate of the CIHR is getting research to market ... expertise from the business side was important to fill out the skill set and expertise of the governing council."

Dr. Prigent's role as chair of the scientific research committee of the Rx&D Health Research Foundation "demonstrates broader experience than just one company," she added. Rx&D is the trade association for the brand-name pharmaceutical industry in Canada.

But law professor Jocelyn Downie of Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, said pharmaceutical company representatives "do not belong at the table setting policy, directions and strategies for publicly funded research.

... The interests of the pharmaceutical industry are not aligned with the interests of the public."

If the governing council wants input from the pharmaceutical industry, it can invite representatives to meetings to make presentations, said Downie, who holds a Canada Research Chair in health law and policy.

Pfizer is an "especially" bad choice to have representation on the governing body for Canada's health granting agency, she added.

Downie noted that in July, Pfizer Inc., the parent of Pfizer Canada, paid US\$75 million to Kano State in northern Nigeria in an out-of-court settlement for 1996 drug trials that Nigerian officials allege led to the deaths of 11 children.

In September, Pfizer Inc. paid US\$2.3 billion in fines and penalties — the largest such fine paid by a pharmaceutical company — because it marketed four drugs for off-label uses. One of those drugs, the painkiller valdecoxib (Bextra), was pulled from the market in the United States and Canada in 2005 because of safety issues identified by the US Food and Drug Administration

and Health Canada. Off-label uses are those for which drugs have not received approval for marketing from the federal regulatory body and for which there may be inadequate, or no, safety data.

Morris Barer, director of the Centre for Health Services and Policy Research at the University of British Columbia, notes that members of the CIHR's governing council "are expected to take off and leave their daily hats at the door, before assuming GC [governing council] responsibilities." Members are also expected to ensure CIHR meets its objectives of improving the health of Canadians and strengthening the Canadian health care system, he said.

But like Downie, Barer finds a problem with "the track record of this particular organization" and the fact that a senior company representative is sitting at a table "expected to set ethical standards for the country around the conduct of health research and the transparency of research results." — Ann Silversides, *CMAJ*

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