



of this panel as Dr. Everett Koop, former US surgeon general and by implication an independent authority. However, what is not revealed in your report is that the ACSH may be heavily freighted with conflicted interest. One source claims that the ACSH receives 76% of its funding from industrial contributors, including Exxon, the largest manufacturer of phthalates in the world, and that "most of the ACSH panel have ties to the chemical industry."²

The Pugwash Foundation, which addresses health and environmental issues related to scientific advances, claims that the scientific community has to a certain extent lost the trust of the public.³ The title and content of your article illustrate one of the reasons. A firm conclusion on a controversial scientific question is headlined and supported by an apparently credible source without mention of competing interests. A policy of stating such interests is applied elsewhere in *CMAJ* but apparently not in the News and analysis section.

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References

1. Vinyl toys, medical devices get clean bill of health. *CMAJ* 1999;161(4):361,363.
2. Montague P. Precaution and PVC in medicine, Part 2. *Rachel's Environ Health Weekly* 1999;(662).
3. Atiyah M. Science for evil: the scientist's dilemma. *BMJ* 1999;319:448-9.

As a Canadian-born and trained physician, I was both amused and disappointed by the irony in the same-page publication of 2 news articles in *CMAJ*. In "Media coverage of health stories often inaccurate, MDs report,"¹ Greg Basky nicely reviews a Canadian Science Writers Association survey in which only 34% of physicians believed that accurate media coverage occurs for medical health information. Forty-one percent felt that poor reporting was "primarily due to the media's desire to grab audience or reader attention."

The irony comes when this sentence is seen in juxtaposition with the headline of the subsequent anonymous report. "Vinyl toys, medical devices get clean bill of health"² cites the findings of "an independent, non-profit group of US re-

searchers" formed by the ACSH, an organization apparently self-described as "helping Americans distinguish between real and hypothetical health risks." Your reporter acknowledges that this panel's report "directly contradicts another study from an international consortium of 180 organizations, including the American Nurses Association."

The headline clearly gives *CMAJ* readers the impression that these chemicals are safe, in spite of grave doubt about the matter. Not stated is that the ACSH is a source of considerable controversy itself, being heavily funded by the chemical industry. One might reasonably question if any panel of experts chosen would likely reflect the views of the body that formed it.

In the spirit of accuracy in medical reporting, I would suggest that a more appropriate title to this article would be "Debate continues over safety of vinyl toys, medical devices."

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References

1. Basky G. Media coverage of health stories often inaccurate, MDs report. *CMAJ* 1999;161(4):361.
2. Vinyl toys, medical devices get clean bill of health. *CMAJ* 1999;161(4):361,363.

[The associate editor, news and features, responds:]

Alban Goddard-Hill's points are well taken. He is quite correct in surmising that the News and analysis section does not list competing interests. This section and the Features section contain medical news items written by journalists. If we are aware of conflicts of interests that may call into question the credibility of a source we certainly report them. Likewise, we make every attempt to provide balanced coverage. In the article in question, we also quote from Health Care Without Harm, an organization of 41 groups including Greenpeace and the American Public Health Association, which refutes the claims of the ACSH.

Gerald Ross' comments about the headline are similarly well taken. We attempt to write objective yet enticing titles; sometimes we fail.

Barbara Sibbald, BJ

Correction

In the response by Sam Shortt and Marshall Godwin¹ to a letter to the editor by Michael Jacka and Brian Milne, the first sentence of the second paragraph should have read, "Second, 71% of the referring physicians stated that they had not increased referrals to consultants not participating in the alternative funding plan in Kingston or to consultants in other secondary care centres." We apologize for this error.

Reference

1. Shortt S, Godwin M. Are alternative funding plans a good idea?[letter]. *CMAJ* 1999;161(5):485-6.

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