

"Pharmaphobia: How the Conflict of Interest Myth Undermines American Medical Innovation"

Thomas P. Stossel, 2015, 333 pages, Rowman & Littlefield, \$38.00

Review by Norman M. Goldfarb

"Pharmaphobia: How the Conflict of Interest Myth Undermines American Medical Innovation" is a very welcome defense of the biomedical and medical device industries against a relentless witch hunt based on a lot of supposition and very little evidence, thereby diverting countless hours and billions of dollars away from productive efforts to advance public health. Industry critics seem to believe that even the smallest financial consideration, e.g., a free pad of paper, overpowers even the largest noble objective, e.g., saving lives.

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Essential reading for clinical research professionals

The author does not claim there are no instances of misbehavior, only that the witch hunt has tragic consequences for public health. As an accomplished physician and medical researcher, he has seen first-hand the costs imposed by conflict-of-interest "protections."

Ironically, many of the industries' holier-than-thou persecutors display far more bias and far less intellectual integrity than their victims. To make matters worse, many in industry and academia have drunk the conflict-of-interest Kool-Aid and accepted the presumed error of their ways. A good first step would be for the alleged perpetrators to read this book and realize they are among the victims.

The following extracts illustrate the bizarrely destructive state of affairs:

By failing to make the effort to understand that the evidence underlying the conflict-of-interest narrative fails reasonably to support the instigators' claims or their demands for regulation, the enablers have inflicted rampant mandated disclosure, and management and elimination of collaborative relationships between physicians, universities, and industry...

Since its founding, the biotechnology industry has produced valuable biopharmaceuticals and made important contributions to the national economy. Thanks to this enablement of conflict-of-interest regulation, many of the financial incentives that led academic medical researchers to establish the biotechnology industry in the 1970s have been abolished. Industry support for research partnerships with physicians and for medical education and physician training have all declined... Vast resources have been diverted from medical innovation, medical education, and medical care to comply with conflict-of-interest regulations and to violate physician privacy by mandating disclosure of their payments from industry. The conflict-of-interest narrative has contributed to a prosecutorial extortion racket that has extracted enormous sums away from industry's ability to develop new products by forcing it to pay fines for marketing behavior that has caused no damages and arguable provides mainly benefit...

Also conspicuously missing from the cases discussed in Chapter 3 are examples of research misconduct, formally defined as plagiarism, fabrication or falsification of research results. A review of 106 of such misconduct cases reported over an eight-

year interval review revealed that 105 took place in nonprofit institutions and had no commercial involvement...

Two studies have shown that most patients participating in clinical trials were not concerned about whether their physicians running the trials had financial interests in companies sponsoring the studies. Another survey concluded that most research subjects did not consider financial disclosures to be useful or likely to influence their decision-making...

A call to monitor commercial "bias" based on the assumption that such "bias" in biomedical research diminishes "scientific rigor" demands an empiric assessment as to whether researchers' relationships with industry have actually compromised NIH-funded research. No such evidence exists. A voluminous Institute of Medicine report published in 2009 and cited in the revised NIH regulations, while confidently declaring that industry relationships pose dire risks, acknowledged this lack. The emphasis on risk is therefore a manifestation of belief, not of evidence. It is *itself* an example of profound subjective bias...

Finally, the conflict-of-interest narrative literature frequently cites a chapter discussing the role of reciprocity in persuasion in a book titled *Influence, The Psychology of Persuasion*, authored by Robert Cialdini. The narrative, however, neglects to mention that Cialdini explicitly states that customers' recognition of marketing strategies involving reciprocity inducements, such as provision of free samples, completely negates the effectiveness of those tactics. Cialdini recommends that if we feel someone is trying to exploit us in this manner, the appropriate response is not to avoid the encounter but to exploit the exploiter by taking his or her free services, recognizing them as sales ploys, and refusing the request for reciprocation on the grounds that the gift was not a gift, but rather a marketing tactic...

The saddest reason for why the medical product industry hasn't supported its defenders may be that some industry employees actually buy into the conflict-of-interest narrative's conviction that motives trump performance and that appearances trump reality. That conclusion certainly resonates with the companies that declined support by referring to the adverse optics of underwriting conflict-of-interest movement opposition...

Whatever the reasons, industry has failed to address the conflict-of-interest movement's underlying principles — its allegations that industry behavior is corrupt and corrupts physicians and academics. Rather, to the extent it has pushed back at all, it has reacted narrowly — and with little success — to specific crises caused by the conflict-of-interest movement.

The book consists of 16 chapters:

- The Stakes
- A Practitioner's History of Medical Innovation
- Enter the Conflict-of-Interest Mania
- The Mania Mongers
- Abusing Evidence
- Bad Policy Process
- Flawed and Damaging Policies
- Misunderstanding Innovation
- Economic Illiteracy

- Misplaced Criticism of Incremental Innovation
- Rushing to Judgment with False Product Safety Alarms
- Demonizing Marketing Is False Advertising
- The Gift Smoke Screen
- The Lawyers' Ball
- The Price We Pay
- What Is to Be Done?

The book is available in bookstores.

Reviewer

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