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Dr Barry Castleman
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Your reference:
Votre référence:

28 November 2002

Dear Dr Castleman,

Thank for your letters to the Director-General, most recently of 7 October 2002, and earlier of 25 February 2002, on the subject of how we are handling conflict of interest at WHO, and in particular at the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC).

As you know, WHO has taken the issue of conflict of interest a great deal more seriously during Dr Brundtland's term of office. On her first day as Director-General she introduced a declaration of interest procedure for senior staff, and in September 2000 this was followed up by the formal introduction of a declaration of interest procedure for experts.

We do value input and comment on these processes and the expertise that you and your co-signatories bring to this field is welcome. In anticipation of the second anniversary of the procedures for experts, we commissioned in August this year a review by a consultant of how the new procedures were being used in practice.

Her review revealed that during the first 15 months of operation there was indeed a need for improvement of our handling of the new procedures in many departments, both in terms of when to use of the standard form and how to make use of the information provided. A marked improvement was noted by the consultant in 2002. We also need to expand its use to our offices at regional level and in countries, to the extent that they use WHO experts.

In the light of your concerns, I asked the consultant to look specifically at arrangements for use of the form in meetings connected to the IARC monographs. She reported that the form had been used for meetings of the Monograph Programme within the Carcinogen Identification and Evaluation Unit since October 2001 and administrative procedures concerning its use had since then been properly followed.

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She examined in particular the forms relating to meetings on man-made vitreous fibers, on traditional herbal medicines, some mytoxins, naphthalene and styrene, and on tobacco smoke and involuntary smoking. She reported that the first two of these meetings in fact highlighted a key issue covered in your letter namely what to do if a conflict of interest is declared by a potential participant.

We have given extensive thought to the issue, based on a number of actual cases both in IARC and in other parts of WHO. Our view is that if an individual has made a declaration disclosing an interest relating to the subject matter of the meeting concerned, that in itself is not an automatic bar to his or her participation in the meeting or at least certain phases of it. The extent of participation should depend on the precise nature of the conflict and the precise nature of the expertise that the individual brings. If any participation does take place, all other participants in the meeting should be made aware of the existence of the expert's interest, and the report of the meeting should also state what occurred..

To take the styrene example, two members out of 29 declared that they had consultancies to the styrene industry and received research funds from the industry. Because both however had the specific expertise that only comes from doing research on the substance, they were allowed to participate in the meeting, but did not participate in the final evaluation and conclusion concerning styrene. The fact that they did not participate in the conclusion will be made known in the published report of the meeting.

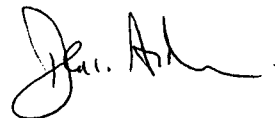
More broadly we do share your concern that experts attending meetings are drawn from a wide pool and we are working to increase diversity on the panels from which they are drawn.

As a consequence of the review by our consultant we shall be issuing next year (and publishing on our web site) some revisions to improve our processes for handling the declaration of interests by experts.

I should let you know that Dr Rice has now retired and will be replaced at IARC from 1 January 2003 by Dr Cogliano, from the United States Environmental Protection Agency.

Thank you again for your and your co-signatories involvement in this work.

Yours sincerely,



Denis G. Aitken
Chef de Cabinet
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