

Letter to the Editor

Re: A Rebuttal: Secret Ties to Industry and Conflicting Interests in Cancer Research, March, 2007; 50(3):227–233

Dear Dr. Markowitz:

After first reading the article by Hardell et al. [2007], I decided not to respond to it due to its lack of objectivity and scientific merit. However, over the few months since AJIM chose to present this article as though it were a typical peer-reviewed scientific article, some of Hardell et al.'s views have been cited in other manuscripts. Thus, I thought that your readers should be aware of some factual errors contained within the article, and, as importantly, of the almost certain minefield of publishing personal attacks in a scientific journal. I want to disclose that I have, over the years, served as an expert in litigation involving numerous industrial chemicals, including asbestos, benzene, and dioxins, and as a consultant, as well as an adjunct professor, have published nearly 200 articles in peer reviewed scientific journals in the fields of toxicology, industrial hygiene, and risk assessment.

Before discussing some of the problems with the Hardell et al. article, I would note that he himself has served as an expert in litigation related to dioxin and other chemicals, and that he offered opposing testimony to many of the scientists that he criticized in his recent article, a fact that has been noted by others who have submitted letters regarding this manuscript [Stampfer, 2007; Trichopoulos, 2007; McLaughlin et al., 2007; Wakeford, 2007]. Even considering the erratum published in AJIM (Editor, 2007), this fact should have been discussed in the article. In my view, the endgame for Hardell et al.'s criticisms does not focus on science and ethics; rather, it should be recognized as part of an ongoing concerted effort to attack the integrity and credibility of those whose views are not in alignment with those of Dr. Hardell and other experts similarly involved in litigation.

The tone of the language used by Hardell et al. should have provided cause for concern by the reviewers of his

manuscript, as well as by the members of your editorial board. Indeed, if a proper peer review had actually taken place, it would have included input from those whom Hardell et al. attacked. At best, a less vitriolic article might have qualified as a commentary, not as a peer-reviewed journal article, and there should have been an opportunity for opposing views to be presented in a companion piece(s).

There are several reasons why the Hardell article should never have been characterized as a peer reviewed manuscript. First, it would be virtually impossible to select reviewers who understood enough about the claims being made to be able to execute a fair and complete review, particularly without any input from some of the persons attacked. I say this because a proper analysis would have required them to be aware of all of the documents (many not publicly available) that Hardell et al. chose to reference, and, more importantly, the reviewers would not be aware of the abundance of information overlooked by the authors and not cited in the article. A traditional peer review process involves relatively open access to all relevant information, a goal that is unattainable when referencing testimony from a single perspective expressed in legal proceedings.

Next, the inference by Hardell et al. that anyone who receives payment for their scientific efforts, by definition, is unable to perform legitimate and trustworthy research is flawed, a point that has been discussed for more than a decade in respected scientific journals [Rothman, 1993a,b; Landow, 2002; Lanier, 2006]. If one accepts their premise, then nearly anyone participating in scientific research should be viewed as compromised. For example, why not claim that the work of university professors is likely not valid because certain results would likely earn them additional financial support, or certain results might further the interests of regulatory agencies, who often financially support their work? Likewise, questions could be raised regarding the work of scientists at regulatory agencies because it could be alleged that their funding is often dependent upon the degree of public worry they can generate by overstating the possible hazards of toxicants. Scientists in non-governmental organizations, though not generally a popular target for the media, could also be criticized by some scientists as lacking objectivity because their funding sources and contributors

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