

Pharmaceutical Company Power Threatens Academic Freedom

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"The controversial withdrawal of a job offer to internationally renowned scholar and scientist David Healy is another example of the dangerous power that the pharmaceutical industry wields over the academic enterprise", MRG spokesperson Joel Lexchin said today.

In recent years the industry has adopted a policy of intimidation of academics and researchers. There are numerous examples.

In Canada, the Canadian Co-ordinating Office for Health Technology Assessment (CCOHTA), a federal non-profit corporation, produced a report suggesting that a class of cholesterol-lowering drugs, the statins, were interchangeable. Bristol Myers Squibb, a company that makes one such drug, launched an injunction to prevent dissemination of the report. After two years in the courts, using most of their resources to fight the suit, CCOHTA won.

Dr. Anne Holbrook, a Professor in the Department of Medicine at McMaster University developed a clinical practice guideline as part of a contract with the Ministry of Health. The report suggested that a class of drugs for fighting ulcers were interchangeable. AstraZeneca, the makers of one such drug, threatened Dr. Holbrook with a law suit. The threat delayed dissemination of the report.

"In my own experience as Director of the Residency Program in Internal Medicine at McMaster University," said another MRG spokesperson, Gordon Guyatt, "we developed a policy that restricted pharmaceutical industry access to residents. The result was a threat of withdrawal of support for education and research."

In the Healy case, the industry has achieved their goal. They have so intimidated the university that they don't even have to make explicit threats. Dr. Healy's lecture, which included a suggestion that an antidepressant might cause suicide, lead to the withdrawal of his job offer. The reason: the maker of the antidepressant had given over \$1 million dollars in grants to the institution offering Dr. Healy the job. The successful intimidation of academic medicine threatens the public's

access to balanced information on benefits and harms of prescription drugs.