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Academic freedom and its limits

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If academic research is not devoted to finding the truth, it is a form of propaganda, and not necessarily to be preferred to other forms ... [academic research] can only be justified on the ground that those who undertake it have been trained to put the attempt to get it right above all other considerations whatsoever (Russell, 1991: 19).

This statement by Conrad Russell, son of Bertrand Russell, positions academic knowledge as pure and untainted by other interests. The pursuit of scientific knowledge is based on the principle that it is apolitical and value-free. Academics, claims Russell, are the heirs of the medieval church (Russell, 1991). Like the medieval church, contemporary academics are pitted against the power of the state in an attempt to retain control over the production of 'ideas'. And like the church, academics are supposed to pursue an 'other-worldly ideal while depending on others for their sources of income' (Russell, 1991: 8).

The opening quote from Russell (1991) articulates an orthodox academic position. He views tensions between the state and academia deriving from a clash of two valid principles. For academia the principle is one of free inquiry. The state is concerned with the principle of accounting for public money. But Russell overlooks many other 'valid principles' that may clash in academic research. The principle of social justice may conflict with the principle of knowledge sharing, and principles of commercial interests may hinder academic ones.

Russell assumes that we can separate out society from science, and that we can eliminate social influences from the processes of producing knowledge.

However, this chapter argues that the division between academia and other social institutions is not so clear-cut. Indeed, we cannot make such clear distinctions between knowledge and interests. There are many ways society shapes the research questions we ask, how we collect information and how we interpret and analyse our data.

Russell argues that allowing any other principle than the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake in academia risks 'destroying the base of the whole discipline' (Russell, 1991: 19). We can ask ourselves whether the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake characterises academic research today in New Zealand. If it does not – does that mean that academia is now irrelevant, or is there more to academia and research than the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake?

There have been profound changes in the value placed on academic freedom in recent New Zealand history. In the mid-1980s New Zealand embarked on a neo-liberal revolution which attempted to create individuals who were 'enterprising and competitive' entrepreneurs (Olssen, 2002: 59). The neo-liberal ethos had a dramatic impact on the education sector. The autonomy of universities was severely undermined, and the requirement to attract students to courses to ensure profit led to a 'dumbing down' of higher education (Olssen, 2002). Students were consumers, who were now in a better position to make demands about the educational 'product' they were purchasing. In addition, influenced by lobbying from the New Zealand Business Roundtable, contestability in research was encouraged (Olssen, 2002). The increasing contestability of funding gave the state greater control over what is researched and by whom (Olssen, 2002).

Others talk of more subtle attacks on academic freedom. Strathern (2000) suggests we have entered a new epoch, described as an audit culture, where 'reckonings, evaluations and measurements' dominate. The auditing of research and teaching outputs of universities promotes a standardisation and normalisation of practices fostering conformity which has 'direct consequences, and for many dire ones, for intellectual production' (Strathern, 2000: 3).

The interface between academia and the state is indeed a contested space, but it appears that this struggle is more complex than Russell's stand-off between two valid principles or positions. There are more subtle political influences at play, as well as influences on the styles of research that are given credibility, and the types of knowledge that are allowable. This chapter draws on semi-structured interviews with fifteen New Zealand public health researchers that explored some of the specific issues facing academics today. Researchers were selected from a list of those who had successfully obtained Health Research

Council funding, and as such had some experience in the research area. The sample included researchers in tenured academic positions and researchers on contract from a range of institutions. Interviews were of 20 to 50 minutes' duration. Ethical approval was obtained and, to protect confidentiality, any information directly identifying respondents has been excluded from the discussion below.

Public health is an intriguing academic discipline. Besides attempting to understand the relationships between health and society, many public health researchers see themselves as advocates, and have strong links with policy development. Researchers may also be under commercial contracts. A dramatic example of the commercial and political sensitivities surrounding public health can be seen in the tobacco control area (Glantz and Balbach, 2000). Tobacco companies have a commercial interest in suppressing some research as certain results (such as the addictive nature of nicotine) are unwelcome (Martin, 1999). In contrast, some potential recipients of the results of public health research have also actively engaged in the process of lobbying, one example being AIDS activists who successfully brought about changes in the funding for research on AIDS drugs (Watney, 1994).

Of the fifteen researchers interviewed for this study, most could recount examples of research findings being delayed or actively suppressed, and many others recounted examples of attempts to influence their research directly for non-scientific reasons. All researchers identified political influences shaping the research environment in some way. An examination of academic freedom and its limits uncovers important ways knowledge is shaped by social forces, even in social settings where the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake is given authoritative sanction. It can be argued that to some extent all researchers face similar issues to those discussed here, but they are likely to be more prominent in disciplines such as public health, education and social policy where there are direct political implications for the research undertaken.

This chapter reviews some of the more prominent ways academic freedom is contested. The first sections cover the more overt forms of constraint on academic freedom, considering the active suppression of research and the commercial and political influences on research. The chapter then examines the more subtle forms of limitation on research seen in the process of peer review, the marginalisation of particular ways of knowing and the credibility given to different styles of research. After introducing these issues in relation to relevant literature, each section illustrates how the issues may play out in public health research in New Zealand by drawing on material from the interviews. It should be noted that there is no attempt here to assess the

prevalence of the constraints on the academic freedom of public health researchers. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the experiences and perceptions of public health researchers and suggest that there are a range of extra-scientific forces that shape the research outputs in Aotearoa/New Zealand today.

Overt constraints

Most environmental scientists are afraid to take a public stand if it means appearing to challenge powerful corporations, governments or professions. They are afraid of what top officials in their organisation may think and do. They are aware of legislation that prohibits them from speaking to the media about their work without permission. They are afraid that they might be blocked from promotion, shunted to less interesting work, or even dismissed (Martin, 1992: 11).

The fear of speaking out is an extreme example of how academic freedom is limited, and recognition of this is evidenced by a developing literature on the topic. Brian Martin is a prominent researcher in this field. In his publications, which document cases of suppression in Australia and elsewhere, he cites examples of scientists in Australia being dismissed for speaking out, or where scientific work has been withheld from publication (Martin, Baker, Manwell *et al.*, 1986; Martin 1992, 1999). Martin notes how the defamation law has been used in Australia to silence dissent, and how he himself has been the subject of such attempts. Significantly, he observes that 'overt suppression is the exception: suppression of dissent works most effectively when it is self-imposed' (Martin, 1992: 1). This chapter will explore more covert forms of suppression.

Commercial influences compromise the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. This is an issue for many disciplines, but is particularly noticeable in the field of biomedicine, and especially biotechnology. The rapid rise of the biotechnology industry 'created a veritable pandemic of financial conflicts of interest' (Korn, 2000: 2235). For example, questions were raised over the financial interests of investigators and institutions after a number of deaths of research participants following gene transfer experiments (Korn, 2000).

The most publicised death was that of Jesse Gelsinger, an 18-year old who suffered from a mild form of a genetically determined metabolic disorder that was controlled by diet and drugs. He consented to participate in an experiment at the University of Pennsylvania's Institute of Human Gene Therapy. The experiment involved injecting into his liver virus particles containing a gene to

correct the gene defect. Jesse died four days after the trial, probably from an immune reaction to the virus (Savulescu, 2001).

Volunteers were recruited into this experiment with descriptions of the research as having 'promising results', and assurances that their participation would be clinically beneficial, despite there being no evidence of benefit at that stage. Of even greater ethical concern was the fact that the researchers held patents covering aspects of the technology employed in the experiment and had equity holdings in the private-sector biotechnology collaborator in the project. The participants in the study were not aware of the researchers' financial interest in the outcomes of the study (Savulescu, 2001). Although this case raises questions about the ethical standards of research, also at issue is whether academic freedom was compromised by a commercial imperative to carry out the trials.

There have been other instances of biomedical researchers being punished for exercising their right to academic freedom. A well-publicised overseas case involved a researcher who reported adverse effects from a drug (deferipone) manufactured by a Canadian Company, Apotex Incorporated. The company had co-funded the research into deferipone, but threatened the researcher, Nancy Olivieri, with legal action if she disclosed her concerns about deferipone. Olivieri did report her findings to scientific meetings and had them published in academic journals. Due to pressure from the company she was removed as director of the research programme at the University of Toronto (Ledgerton, 2000; Nathan and Weatherall, 1999). In response to international pressure, however, the University restored Olivieri to a teaching and research position (Savage, 2000). Savage notes a number of other prominent overseas cases where commercial companies blocked the publication of research results or engineered the sacking of researchers when results were unfavourable to their interests.¹

Academic journals are concerned about how their role in promoting academic freedom is compromised by commercial interests. A particular concern in biomedical journals has been the role of corporate sponsors in drug trials. It has been estimated that bringing a new drug on to the market in the US costs \$500 million. Much of this cost comes from the conduct of clinical trials, and to reduce this cost, companies have used private research groups instead of traditional academic research groups. Academic centres, in an effort to compete with private research groups, have been tempted to allow sponsors to dictate the terms of the design of research, the interpretation of results and dissemination of findings in trials (*New Zealand Medical Journal*, 2001 – Editorial statement). Unfavourable results may never be released under such arrangements. Competition for research funds may also lead to similar situations

when government or other agencies sponsor research. The competitive environment of research can be seen as a major factor in limiting academic freedom. In response to this situation many biomedical journals require authors to state their role in the research and the freedom of access they have to the interpretation and dissemination of research findings. Despite these requirements for manuscripts submitted to medical journals, many researchers involved in clinical trials have limited access to data they help provide, and limited control over the publication of research (Schulman, Seils, Timbie *et al.*, 2002). Some researchers feel powerless in contract negotiations with sponsors of clinical trials (Schulman *et al.*, 2002).

Attempts to suppress research results because of commercial interests have been noted in New Zealand. Neil Pearce, a Wellington public health researcher, recounts how New Zealand researchers discovered that an asthma medication called fenoterol was causing an epidemic of asthma deaths in New Zealand. In response to their findings, the pharmaceutical company that manufactured the drug pressured the medical journal not to publish the results and called in various international 'experts' to undermine New Zealand researchers' credibility (Pearce, 1992).

The impact of commercial concerns on research was noted by a number of public health researchers. For example, it was suggested that research on shellfish and toxins was driven by export concerns and not health concerns for the people eating them. Another researcher outlined a case in which he received a stern letter 'inviting me to change the story' after his research team discovered an infectious organism in an area (outside of New Zealand). The letter's concern was that such a discovery could have adverse effects on tourism in that area. At a more general level one researcher identified that commercially minded managers in research centres adhered to the view that 'the client is king'.

Most researchers noted that there was a potential for conflict with contract research with commercial or government agencies. However, all those who discussed this stated that they would ensure that the contract allowed them to publish.

The commercial imperatives of academic journals can also limit academic freedom. In many instances, authors of articles accepted for publication in academic journals are forbidden from disclosing information about their research findings to the media until the journal has been published. This does not promote the academic ideals of dissemination of research. Its aim is to maximise the impact of the news and enhance the news value of the journals (Altman, 2002). One public health researcher noted how this requirement clashed with her own style of research. She noted that:

We see our first responsibility as back to that research community [i.e. the community that data was collected from], but on the other hand the output for us in terms of the research funding is to publish a paper.

If research results were fed back to the community and the media reported this, then journals would be less willing to publish the research as the journals want 'all the kudos when they release it'.

In short, there are many ways commercial interests can limit academic freedom. Journals want to have maximum impact so do not want to publish old news; the ethical conduct of clinical trials and other aspects of research design may be compromised by financial concerns, and attempts may be made to actively suppress the dissemination of information.

Political influence

Public health research has many political ramifications. Public health research may challenge the political and social organisation of society. Findings may conflict with the interests of powerful groups in society, including drug companies, health professionals and politicians. A number of public health researchers interviewed identified instances where political pressures had led to the suppression of the publication of research. In cases in which a government ministry had been involved in commissioning research, it might suppress research that was 'risky for the Minister'. One researcher noted that in the past certain things were not allowed to be published in a ministry publication because the ministry took the view that the issue was something 'the public really should not know about'. This researcher noted that he had 'experienced very active suppression of content' and that 'even to this day that material has not seen the light of day'. He felt, however, that in more recent years there had been a change such that he would 'be surprised if we experienced the same thing again'. Suppression is not the prerogative of government ministries. A powerful non-governmental organisation had also objected to a research report and 'tried to keep it out of the public arena'.

Censorship of research was also commonly noted. For example, research for government-produced journals has the potential to be censored by the relevant ministry. This form of censorship took the form of changing words or phrases that were not politically acceptable.

I mean it is quite a high level of censorship really ... I found it quite shocking actually. I thought things in a [named journal] like that would

have to be factually correct, would have to be peer reviewed, but then after that they would just be printed.

A government ministry had 'expressed displeasure' when results from research had been obtained by the media or others. The researcher also noted that 'there have been times when [a ministry] asked for changes to be made to papers that have been submitted for publication.' This researcher thought that changes have been made so that the ministry concerned was more accepting of the need to protect the researcher's scientific integrity. Some ministries were seen as highly 'risk averse' with a very strong focus on 'managing risks for the Minister'. One researcher commented that 'increasingly through the 90s [government agencies'] role has been to cover the Minister's arse'.

It was also argued that some organisations did not speak out on particular public health issues because to do so would jeopardise their funding. One research organisation was identified as having been disadvantaged in its funding because the researchers did not take a 'moderate' stance. One researcher felt that her own research centre was seen as being 'a bit too lippy' and that they had 'been punished because we have spoken out'. She went on to say that

I think that it is quite a norm with Māori that the minute Māori get a voice, somehow that voice is either hampered by way of resources, funding or political interference.

Political influences on where funding was allocated, and how research funding was determined by 'the flavour of the month' were also remarked upon. One researcher commented that the Crown and not iwi, defined priorities in research, but that under a Treaty format both should define the priorities. It was also argued that 'you do have to yield to changes in perceptions of what is important'. Researchers modified their research in response to political signals – 'a wise researcher is very careful about their alignments'. This was more so in the case of researchers who wanted to work with government agencies – 'you are going to have to toe the line to some extent'. Researchers had to be 'sympathetic to the pressures and processes' of government.

Contesting government views could lead to intimidation of researchers. A researcher summoned before a parliamentary select committee because of his research was cited by an interviewee as an example of 'government interference in research'. Another researcher felt that his organisation had been 'fairly thoroughly bludgeoned' by a government ministry for speaking out about things. There was also an impression of more subtle forces at play:

If you publish a series of papers then very often you will find that words are said in particular places and the funding dries up slowly, and you don't get the promotion that you want.

If researchers took on a strong advocacy role in a contentious area then funders may suspect that they are not going to carry out impartial research.

However, other examples indicate that researchers maintained funding even when carrying out research that was not favoured by the government. For example, poverty research had been funded throughout the 1990s despite its being out of favour politically. In addition independent outlets for research exist. There are journals in New Zealand that remain independent of government influence, and conference organisers often promote controversy as opposed to avoiding it. Most researchers felt they did not have any difficulty getting published in a political sense.

Small-town New Zealand and peer review

Peer review of research is seen as the cornerstone of credibility, but the peer review process is also a powerful means of limiting critical inquiry. In New Zealand, with its small funding base and small research circle, there is a perception that the system of peer review is often abused.

Before publication in academic journals, articles are sent to 'peers' to review. If the reviews are positive then publication is likely. Peer review is also a common component in determining what research receives funding. However, the process of peer review is a closed one. The reviewer may know the names of the authors of the article or research application, and if they do not they could take a very good guess. The authors, however, will not know who the reviewers are. One problem is that with the specialisation of research, some reviewers may gain a competitive advantage by being overly critical of work in their field. The peer-review system is also a barrier to the publication of novel findings or interpretations (Altman, 2002).

Concerns about peer review are exacerbated in New Zealand due to its small size (for an analogous argument in relation to ethics see Tolich, 2001). Everyone knows everyone, so retaining anonymity can be difficult. Most researchers noted this problem of New Zealand's smallness in relation to the limited range of funders available, the peer review process and getting publication. One researcher argued that a general problem with peer review was that:

We all view things from our own inevitably prejudiced perspectives.

Others concurred:

I have been shocked. Well cronyism is probably too harsh a word ... and we could talk about objective peer review from now to Doomsday – and it's a load of cods.

Another noted that 'your paper or proposal' is likely to be reviewed by someone 'who may be in a somewhat competitive position'. Others reiterated this view:

It is quite appalling really, there is a lot of personal stuff going on, people protecting their patch all the time ... I was appalled at the personal comments that people made about people in the research team [and] that they could say that without being named.

She argued that this was a particular problem in the competitive funding environment in New Zealand. One researcher argued that with peer review in a small country there needed to be a 'fairly strong sense of fair play' so that people did not 'push their own particular research'. This required 'pretty saintly behaviour really'.

Similarly, one researcher maintained that there were opportunities for peer reviewers 'to put down other projects' which was particularly a problem as 'academics are renowned for having their own viewpoints and thinking that other people who think differently are just plain wrong'. In the words of one researcher: 'It is such a small country that if you fall out with five or six people then you have completely knackered your funding base'.

Marginalisation and discrimination

New Zealand researchers may face particular challenges due to the small size of the country, but the impact of discrimination can be found everywhere. Savage noted that 'those who are the victims of discrimination cannot enjoy academic freedom in the same manner as the rest of the academic community' (Savage, 2000: 15). Savage is referring here to academics themselves who may suffer discrimination because of their gender or ethnicity. Kelsey notes that:

Historically, Māori who are steeped in their own knowledge have struggled to have their voices heard and be taken seriously ahead of Pākehā 'experts'

within and outside the universities. Those who have asserted the validity of Māori knowledge have rarely found a safe space to speak in the universities, let alone enjoyed the same job security, funding for research, institutional recognition or collegial support as their non-Māori counterparts whose world-view is defined in terms of Western knowledge (Kelsey, 2000: 231).

Concern about discrimination has also been expressed about research participants. For example, in Canada an effort was made to apply the ethical standards used for researching individuals to communities. This would entail the requirement to receive informed consent from the communities before research could be carried out on them. Community leaders would provide the consent. The reason for this development related to research on first nations peoples in Canada. But Savage suggests that if the principle was generalised to other collectivities, such as governments and other organisations, then major impediments would face all research. Savage notes that ethics policies in New Zealand may require researchers to be sensitive to the cultural and social frameworks of participants. This issue initially applied to Māori participants but can be extended. Savage contends that

Applying ethics policies to all collectivities may ensure that only research favourable to the ruling group or celebrating the *status quo* will be accepted (Savage, 2000: 166).

There has for some time been a strong reaction against research carried out by academics and others on 'minority' populations. For example, in New Zealand many Māori and Pacific Island spokespeople have taken strong exception to research 'on people', i.e. where researchers have come into communities to collect information on people, taken that information away and published it or reported it, but rarely given anything back to the researched community. Often the published material would present information such that it would intentionally or unintentionally portray the community in a bad light. Linda Tuhiwai Smith has put this position most forcefully:

... research of Māori is marked by a history that has shaped the attitudes and feelings Māori people have held towards research. Research is implicated in the production of Western knowledge, in the nature of academic work, in the production of theories that have dehumanized Māori and practices which have continued to privilege Western ways of knowing, while denying the validity for Māori of Māori knowledge, language and culture (Smith, 1999: 183).

Kaupapa Māori research has attempted to restore faith in research that is of benefit for Māori. There is no single approach to kaupapa Māori research, but one cited concern of the approach is 'the struggle for autonomy over our cultural well being' (G. Smith, cited in Smith, 1999: 185).

Reid argues that 'the attitude that knowledge is objective, value-free, and apolitical does not sit well with many Māori' (Reid, 1999: 62). It is not difficult to see that particular value positions are taken and acknowledged, and one such value is that research 'should have value and relevance to the people studied' (Reid, 1999: 62). The 'academic freedom' demanded by adherence to the ideals of science may be rejected from a kaupapa Māori perspective. Academic freedom is one goal, but other factors, such as contributing to Māori development, may take priority. If research findings do not make that contribution, the value position taken may mean that the research is not undertaken or that findings do not get disseminated.

If academic freedom is emphasised above all other principles (including social justice), then any impingements on research activities and approaches are greeted with disdain. When aboriginal groups in Australia successfully stopped the dissemination of sensitive research findings about their people, offence was taken by academics that information was being 'swept under the carpet' (Rags, 1996: 22). The idea that communities could have control over the information collected from them is seen by some as an anathema to good science.

How research is interpreted becomes particularly important here. Statistics New Zealand has had to grapple with the value-laden nature of the collection and use of statistical information (Robson and Reid, 2001). The way statistics are presented portrays particular views of the world, and particular representations may be offensive to some groups. For example, the statistic that Māori students are over two and a half times more likely than non-Māori students to leave school with no qualifications can be interpreted in a number of ways. A common interpretation follows a cultural deficit model: Māori students are deficient because of something in their culture that means they do not achieve the same outcomes as Pākehā students (Robson and Reid, 2001). It is apparent that this interpretation can lead to a criticism of Māori culture in general. An alternative analytic framework portrays the statistics in a very different light. Using a framework of institutional racism means that the focus is on the impact of historical injustices that are still played out today. Using this framework it can be argued that Māori students are not failing at a higher rate than Pākehā students, but that the education system is more likely to fail Māori students, or that the education system is more likely to privilege Pākehā students (Robson and Reid, 2001).

Indeed, statistics and their interpretation are already value-laden. The concepts we draw on to interpret numbers are not neutral, just as all other forms of interpretation are value-laden. In some circumstances, groups of people may demand that academics avoid interpretations that paint a negative picture of them. In response to these developments, one non-Māori researcher expressed concern about the research process in relation to Māori. She stated that

It is really easy to be criticised in research if you are addressing any issues on Māori at the moment, and that is a bit of a worry.

The incorporation of a consideration of Treaty Issues and concerns for consultation with tangata whenua in health research funding applications (Health Research Council, 2003) has perhaps led to a focus on the issue of marginalisation and discrimination in relation to Māori, as opposed to other forms of discrimination, from respondents in this research.

Styles of research

Not only do particular groups in society suffer marginalisation, but also certain approaches to research can be marginalised. Martin argues that "those who stick to 'scholarly' methods and deal with 'safe' (not too controversial) topics usually increase their prospects for advanced degrees, tenure and promotion" (1992: 14). Some public health researchers suggested that certain approaches to research design were more likely to be funded than others. In particular, it was still more difficult to get qualitative research funded in the health area:

I think it's easier to prepare an application that will be successful if you are using mainstream quantitative methods ...

and

the research community is still [fixed on] the randomised control trial type model as a standard, but it just doesn't work in the real world.

In competitive research funding applications, a number of researchers noted that comments from referees indicated that they did not understand qualitative research approaches. One felt that even where qualitative research was funded, it was from a "particular perspective on what qualitative research should be ... [and] they [the assessing committees] have got a very narrow view of what qualitative research is".

Others argued that it was harder for research on complex issues to get funded and that 'reductionist research that looks at a particular risk factor, which gets easily identified' is easier to fund. One researcher argued that current formal procedures of assessment had a negative impact on innovative approaches in research:

So we might have a process that works very well to engender more technical knowledge. That is, doing better with the knowledge that we already have. But if we want innovative thinking, it is not going to come out of that type of approach.

One researcher took a different tack, arguing that there should be more control over what was researched. He believed that research funding in the public health area should be based on "public health impact" and preventability. This would appear to move in the direction of specific local interventions as being the focus of public health research.

Another researcher related a story on the issue of who is appropriate to research whom. There is a common argument that in some forms of qualitative research, to enhance rapport and gain insight, there needs to be some matching of researcher with respondent. For example, it might be appropriate that women interview other women. This has led to problems in defining what is appropriate: should young women interview young women, rural young women interview rural young women and so forth. This debate usually links to debates about power relations in research. That is, it is often women, Māori, the poor and so on who are researched 'on'. There should be more effort to research 'with'. The resolution of the appropriateness of researcher needs to also relate to the research question, what sort of analysis will be carried out and other methodological issues (see Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

One researcher discussed research to be carried out on fathers. To his surprise he found that almost all the research team were women. Given the issues about appropriateness of researchers, the use of a women-dominated research team to undertake a study on fathers was unexpected. When the research results came out he wrote an article raising some of the issues for debate and attempted to get it published in a New Zealand journal. The process of having his article reviewed was drawn out, and he found out that a particular organisation had been lobbying heavily for the article not to be published. He also noted that some of those who wanted to stop his article being published were also on editorial boards of other journals, and were in powerful academic positions.

The researcher was concerned about the level of debate here. He suggested

that "we see it as very personal very quickly" instead of debating the ideas, and that positions become very polarised – you either supported one side in the debate or the other – instead of opening up issues for discussion, which might lead to some middle ground. It is certainly possible that there were problems with the quality of the paper this researcher was attempting to have published, but having particular groups lobby to prevent publication raises serious concerns about academic freedom.

Conclusion

Returning to the opening quote, Russell argues that academic research can only be justified if the "attempt to get it right" is put above all other considerations (Russell, 1991: 19). But this means different things to different people. For some, getting the process of research right, so as to respect those involved in the research, is more important than any end result. For others, ensuring that a good relationship is maintained with powerful organisations is more important than immediate results. Recognising that principles do at times clash should caution one against taking polarised positions – academic freedom at all costs, public accountability at all costs, social justice at all costs and so on.

There are many challenges to academic freedom and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Some of the challenges could be seen by most people as unambiguously detrimental to research. A drug company pressuring researchers not to release information that may reflect badly on their product only serves the interest of the company and its concern for market share. On the other hand, a Māori organisation demanding control over the research process may be an empowering process for that organisation, and in the long term the research may enhance our understanding of the world. But those who put the principle of academic freedom above all else might find both situations equally unpalatable.

Without doubt there are many ways academic freedom and critical inquiry are limited in New Zealand. But it is sociologically naïve to believe that it could be otherwise. We cannot separate social influences from knowledge production – knowledge and society are firmly entwined. For public health researchers, the role of social influences in research is particularly important, given the impact that research can have on policy decisions. There is widespread acceptance that these social influences exist, and many researchers do not simply accept their lot if they feel they have been adversely affected, but engage with the process as a site of struggle. For those active in public

health, research may be as much an act of advocacy as it is an act of knowledge production.

Does the evidence of the circumscribed nature of academic freedom make it irrelevant? If researchers are not completely free to pursue knowledge for its own sake, what does that mean for the academic enterprise? What can academics offer that propagandists do not? The capacity to constantly interrogate and challenge the process of knowledge production is a fundamental contribution academics can make. Academics can submit the process of knowledge production to critical scrutiny, attempt to understand what forces are at play, expose the values and assumptions that are inherent in any process of knowledge production, elaborate on how particular principles and values may clash, and explore the inherent limitations on knowledge production itself. Academics need to be supported in this enterprise, and where they challenge the consensus or the powerful, universities must take strong action to protect the right of academics to act as critics. Without university support, researchers are vulnerable to political pressures, pressures from other interest groups and even self-censorship.

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Note

- 1 Brian Martin (1992, 1997, 1999) gives examples of researchers and academics facing a range of pressures, including losing tenured positions, for holding dissenting views or whistleblowing. One example he cites is of Dr John Coulter, who was dismissed from the post of director of the Institute of Medical and Veterinary Science in Adelaide after releasing preliminary findings on the mutagenic effect of a chemical used for sterilisation at the Institute (Martin, 1999). Medical journals also report cases of threats to researchers who come up with findings that do not suit the funders of research. For example, a US company filed a claim of US\$7-10 million in damages against leading investigators and their universities after research found that a HIV-1 vaccine was no better than a placebo (McCarthy, 2000).