

# **A Faustian pact or a marriage of convenience?**

**Big business increasingly pays the bills for university scientific research. But what happens when they don't like what they pay for?**

**By Lucy Hodges**

*The Independent, 26 April 2001*

This month, a British academic has been splashed across the newspapers in Toronto. Dr David Healy a respected psychiatrist from the University of Wales College of Medicine in Bangor, had been offered, and had accepted, a job at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. This is a teaching hospital affiliated to the University of Toronto, and the job offer was a cause for celebration, certainly for Dr Healy.

Having been courted for two years, he was preparing to move to Canada with his family. But the job offer was rescinded suddenly after Dr Healy voiced concerns about Prozac, the antidepressant drug manufactured by Eli Lilly, which gives large sums of money to the Centre. In a lecture, Dr Healy claimed that taking Prozac might trigger suicide in some patients, a claim that the company denies. Within a week, the job was no longer on the table and Dr Healy was told that his approach was "not compatible" with the Centre's "development goals".

There is no suggestion that Eli Lilly brought pressure to bear on the Centre, and the Centre insists it would not withdraw a job offer because of concerns about offending its corporate sponsors. Nevertheless, Dr Healy's story has led to a debate in the Canadian press about academic freedom. Questions are being asked about the possible impact of corporate funding on academic research. Are lecturers free to make honest judgements or do they have to tailor what they say to suit industrial donors? Are they free to choose the subjects that they research or are they limited to material that will be marketable?

The issue is growing in importance, according to two organisations that are holding a conference next week on the subject. "Because science is increasingly funded by companies and government for a particular purpose, that puts conditions on what people can publish and say," says John Ziman, a fellow of the Royal Society and emeritus professor of physics at Bristol University who will be speaking at the conference. "I'm afraid that it ties science down to corporate or government agendas, and that's dangerous."

For several decades now, the Government and the funding bodies have been putting pressure on scientists to develop links with industry and to seek work that will be of commercial value. New Labour is as keen on it as Mrs Thatcher was in the Eighties. And one can see why.

As George Monbiot explains in his book *Captive State*, for most of the 20th century, scientists in British universities were discouraged from engaging with industry, for fear that such contact would force them to concentrate on technological needs at the expense of profound scientific questions.

That changed in the Seventies and Eighties. Britain, the critics pointed out, was famous for scientific breakthroughs but failed to translate these into the marketplace. Unless British science could be tailored to meet the needs of industry, our global economic position would continue to slide.

That may be true in the short term, says Mr Monbiot. But in the long term it leads to a narrowing of horizons and possibly fewer scientific breakthroughs \_ certainly for those who need them most. "By forcing scientists to focus on issues of great interest to the corporation and of less

interest to those who don't have shares in that corporation means emphasising, for example, cures for non-lethal diseases in the First World rather than killers in the Third World," he argues. Universities have been happy to turn to business for help because they themselves have been so cash-strapped for the past 15 years. The cloisters are now inhabited by some of the biggest and richest organisations. None of which is wrong in itself. Where else is the money for research going to come from? The problem is the effect that has on the work that is done.

The research councils, whose job it is to sustain fundamental research in higher education, have introduced more and more schemes to bring university and industry together. Traditionally, the research councils funded PhD studentships by giving the money to university departments; now, under Industrial Case Studentships, much of that money goes directly to industry, which then picks an academic partner. That alters the balance of power because it gives the company more scope to direct the research and to control publication, says Dr David Packham, a lecturer in materials science at Bath University.

The result can be that PhD theses, traditionally held in libraries for everyone to consult, are subject to embargoes for three years, five years and, in one case, 30 years, according to Dr Packham. During that time, the company can use the research as it sees fit while the public doesn't get a look-in.

"The reason all this is bad is that it leads to restrictions on publication and the possible manipulation of results," he says. "And it can compromise universities with respect to their public duty to remain morally and economically independent of vested interests." The phenomenon is a global one. North American academics have become exercised about what they call "the greatest scandal of our time" \_ the increased corporate control of university medical research. It is like a pact with the devil, jeopardising scholarly independence and public health, they say.

Confidentiality clauses required by companies are a particular threat to academic freedom, according to the American Association of University Professors and the Canadian Association of University Teachers. Toronto appears to be a real hot spot. Another case that rocked Toronto University concerned Nancy Olivieri, a professor of medicine and pediatrics who was threatened with legal action if she told patients that her studies of an experimental drug to treat a blood disease seemed to have serious side-effects.

Despite objections from her sponsor, the Canadian company Apotex, she published her findings. The result was that she lost her job as director of the department of haemoglobinopathy. However, following an international outcry from academics and lobbying by Sir David Weatherall, another fellow of the Royal Society and emeritus regius professor of medicine and director of the Institute of Molecular Medicine at Oxford, she was reinstated.

Institutions can learn lessons from such cases, says Sir David. Agreements between scientists and companies should give the scientists the freedom to reveal concerns about safety.

Universities should support scientists who are the subject of lawsuits that seek to stifle academic freedom. And companies that disagree with scientists should do so openly or via a panel of independent experts.

"It is important to recognise the problem and to get it out into the open," says Dr Packham. "This is happening more and more because of cases such as Nancy Olivieri's. There needs to be a recognition that the interests of industry and commerce, on the one hand, and universities on the other, are sharply different." Dr David Healy says that he is not against industry funding research. In fact he works quite closely with industry and argues that it is unrealistic to expect otherwise. But universities should be clear about what they will and won't accept along with the funding. The University of Toronto and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health could still change their minds, he believes.

*The conference, 'Corruption of scientific integrity? \_ the commercialisation of academic science', is on 2 May at the British Academy, 10 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1Y 5AH. It is organised by the Council for Academic Autonomy and the Campaign for Academic Freedom*

*and Academic Standards. The speakers are John Ziman, Nancy Olivieri, Sir David Weatherall and George Monbiot. Contact Dr David Packham at Bath University for details, e-mail*

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**'It is not true that we breached anyone's academic freedom'**

Thanos Mergoupis was a researcher at the London School of Economics, undertaking a study on the employment effects and other social aspects of tourism. Funded with more than £250,000 by the World Travel and Tourism Council, a group that lobbies on behalf of the industry, Mr Mergoupis began work in 1998.

Halfway through the three-year study, the Council pulled the plug on the contract with the LSE's Centre for the Philosophy of Natural and Social Science. Mr Mergoupis and his assistant were not told the reason, but they lost their jobs as a result. They claim that the project was terminated because the Council thought that the research would not show tourism had a huge potential for job creation. The World Travel and Tourism Council denied that. "We were going through a restructuring," says Eric Belanger, the WTTC's director of communications. "There were changes in the management. We decided that we needed a new focus away from research on job creation to lobbying government. It is not true that we breached anyone's academic freedom."

The case highlights one of the potential pitfalls when universities rely on corporate sponsors to fund academic research. The donors can choose to stop funding at any time.

Mr Mergoupis claims that the LSE should have enforced its contract with the Council and supported the research done in its name. He is supported in his complaint by the Campaign for Academic Freedom and Academic Standards (CAFAS). Earlier this year, Colwyn Williamson, of CAFAS, wrote to Professor Anthony Giddens, the LSE's director, pointing out that the independence of research is protected in the constitution of every British university by the principle of academic freedom. "Did this grand principle provide Mr Mergoupis with any protection in practice?" he asks.

The LSE says that it does not believe that it breached his academic freedom. "Mr Mergoupis has always been at liberty to write and publish. There is a question, however, of whether his academic freedom may have been impinged by the World Travel and Tourism Council. We are as unhappy as Mr Mergoupis that the contract was ended prematurely. We understand that the WTTC decided to terminate the contract with the school because of a shift in funding priorities following a change in senior personnel."