

MUTAGENS AND MANAGERS

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Dr John Coulter has been a leading environmentalist in South Australia since the 1950s. On June 30, 1980 he was sacked from his job at the Institute of Medical and Veterinary Science in Adelaide, and the environmental mutagens testing unit which he headed was closed down. John Coulter's case illustrates the way in which scientific establishments serve corporate and bureaucratic vested interests by stifling those who speak out on issues affecting the public interest.

Background

After receiving his M.B., B.S. degrees and practising general medicine for a few years, John Coulter joined the IMVS in 1959 at the age of 28. His position was a surgical research officer. In about 1967 he was promoted to the position of specialist pathologist.

During his time at the IMVS Dr Coulter was outspoken on numerous environmental and health issues, including water fluoridation, uranium mining, the proposed petrochemical plant at Redcliff in South Australia, the consequences of nuclear weapons tests at Maralinga in SA in the 1950s, and the health hazards of drugs and industrial chemicals. Because he has been willing to write articles and speak at public meetings and rallies on such topics, Dr Coulter has often been called upon by environmental organisations, trade unions and other organisations. In all this activity he has been careful to emphasise that he speaks in his private capacity only.

In the late 1970s Dr Coulter on his own initiative set up in the IMVS a unit for testing the mutagenicity (capacity to cause mutations) of substances using the Ames test. This test uses bacteria to look for mutagenic potential, and is considered one of the best available ways to obtain a cheap, quick and fairly reliable (80 to 90 per cent accuracy) assessment of the cancer-initiating potential of substances. This environmental mutagens testing unit (EMTU) provided a routine service for the testing of chemicals. It was the only such unit in South Australia and one of three in Australia, the others being in Sydney and Melbourne. A more reliable assessment of carcinogenic properties would require experiments with large numbers of animals over a period of years; no testing of this sort takes place in Australia.

The offence

In speaking out about risks to environment and health it is easy to offend corporate and government interests who have a financial or bureaucratic stake in products, practices or policies causing the risk. Research institutes such as the IMVS depend on government money provided through government bodies and individuals sensitive to corporate interests, and to some extent on direct grants from corporations. As a result, those who speak out about risks to environment and health may experience pressures to keep quiet. This has happened to Dr Coulter on a number of occasions.

In 1978 the Bayer company brought an action against the Australian Broadcasting Commission, partly over remarks Dr Coulter had made on a television programme regarding one of its products containing the mutagenic pesticide dichlorvos. The action was subsequently dropped about two years later but in the interim pressure was brought to bear on Dr Coulter through the Agricultural Chemical Trade Association and the Director of the IMVS. Dichlorvos is currently under urgent review by the National Cancer Institute in the US, as some animal tests have suggested that dichlorvos may be carcinogenic.

In 1979 Velsicol Australia complained to the Director of the IMVS about a lecture Dr Coulter had given, in a private capacity, to a Melbourne seminar on pesticides. Dr Coulter had mentioned the way the parent company in the US had handled information on the carcinogenicity of two of their products, chlordane and heptachlor. This matter is well covered in Samuel S. Epstein's book *The politics of cancer*.

Perhaps more threatening to the management of the IMVS was Dr Coulter's mutagenicity testing. Some of the samples submitted for testing came from groups outside the scientific community, in particular from workers' health organisations. Dr Coulter on occasion provided results directly to the groups or workers involved as well as to the IMVS. Such action poses an obvious threat to the control over the dissemination of scientific information typically exercised by the management in government scientific organisations.

On April 16, 1980 Dr Coulter submitted a report to the Fire and Safety Committee of the IMVS on the mutagenic and potentially cancer-causing properties of ethylene oxide, which was being used in an IMVS laboratory as a sterilising agent. At the same time as he released the report to the IMVS Committee, Dr Coulter provided copies to the workers at the laboratory using the chemical. The Director of the IMVS rebuked Dr Coulter for releasing the report to workers. However, the significance of the findings were not disputed: the use of ethylene oxide was immediately discontinued, and \$40,000 is being spent on the construction of an alternative sterilising apparatus.

As a result of stories circulating in the IMVS about the ethylene oxide report, Dr Coulter posted the report and related correspondence on noticeboards of the IMVS. The Director of the IMVS then instructed Dr Coulter not to make available to any staff member of the IMVS any material dealing with the affairs of the IMVS without express approval of the Director.

It was somewhat earlier, in March 1980, that Dr Coulter was informed that on June 30 the environmental mutagens testing unit would be closed and that he would be transferred and demoted with a drop of \$10,000 in annual salary. But instead of being transferred and demoted, on June 30 Dr Coulter was sacked outright, being informed of this a few days previously.

The arguments

A number of claims and counterclaims have been raised in letters published in the Adelaide *Advertiser* concerning the reasons for the closure of the EMTU and the sacking of Dr Coulter. Those who are interested in further details can obtain a collection of pertinent documents by writing to me care of the Environment Centre.

Responses

A large number of individuals and groups have expressed their concern about the sacking of Dr Coulter and the closing of the EMTU at the IMVS. Many letters have been written to newspapers and to the SA Minister of Health. Trade unions, led by the United Trades and Labour Council of SA, have expressed concern about the removal of a service which has frequently benefited their members. The opposition Labor Party in SA has called for a public inquiry into the IMVS, and questions have been asked in SA Parliament by members of the Australian Labor Party and the Australian Democrats.

Dr Coulter has mounted a court challenge against his dismissal. On the other side, the IMVS Council and the SA Liberal-Country Party Government appear to be standing firm.

The Coulter-IMVS dispute illustrates clearly the type of conflict that can arise out of the pressures on the direction and use of scientific research exerted by corporate and government vested interests on the one side and by the public on the

other. Usually such conflict is muted. It is precisely because Dr Coulter has been outspoken about issues of public concern that his dismissal is also a public issue. It remains to be seen whether public pressure will be sufficient to change the decision of the IMVS Council which is backed by the present SA Government. But it is certain that this struggle will not be the last one of its kind.

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