Conference Review

Ethical Issues in Research Relationships between Universities and Industry

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Raymond Spier, University of Surrey, UK

As funding for research in universities from federal and state sources decreases there has been an increase in the intensity of university efforts to attract research funding from industry. To date, industry may be held to support some 7% of university research funding over all subjects which rises to about 12% in the biomedical area. At the same time it is recognized that industry’s funding of its own research and development is decreasing. It is in this climate of financial cutbacks from public sources and increased stringency in industrial expenditures that a new interface for human interactions is being created. This is where university researchers meet with their colleagues from industry, and where lawyers from both sides take seats at the table. But this is where the story begins.

This conference boasted a galaxy of some 20 distinguished speakers; and they did not disappoint. From government, industry, universities, the press and societies there was presented a wide range of viewpoints on the focal issue of scientists and the way they behaved with particular regard to their industrial interactions. Much time was available for discussions both led and in response to the talks. Indeed, the floor speakers and their respondents on the platform sustained a lively, penetrating and vibrant discussion of the issues for the two days of the meeting. What then were the issues and the outcomes?

A clear and novel take-home message came from the talk of Sheldon Krimsky (Tufts University). He had studied the authors of papers in the biomedical field in 1992 who held positions in laboratories in Massachusetts and found that about 15% had some involvement with either a patent, a position on a company advisory board or as an officer in a company, and also 34% of first authors has such an involvement. This was a minimal position as patents not registered for worldwide coverage were not examined and the out-of-state industrial commitments of authors was also omitted. The crucial feature of this data is the degree to which industry has already penetrated the

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* There were c. 70 attendees at this conference.
Address for correspondence: Professor Raymond Spier, School of Biological Sciences, University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey GU2 5XH, UK.
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academic sector. This impression was also left by the talk of David Blumenthal (Massachusetts General Hospital) who noted the degree of involvement of biotechnology companies in university research which amounted to some 50% of the small biotech companies. The issue here is that the traditional function of university research workers acting as uncommitted investigators providing society with, if necessary, unpalatable information on the activities of other sectors, is clearly going to be seriously impugned and compromised. Evidence of this phenomenon is already available. Oil spills in California, sugar in cereals, pesticide-caused cancer, well contamination with chemicals, toxic organics in plastic manufacture, revision of the hit rate of Patriot missiles in the Gulf war are all cases where university researchers were penalized directly or where universities were threatened with the withdrawal of research funding if academics ‘did not toe the line’. It is therefore clear, as this author suggested, that we have to have a variegated university sector with at least some universities solely and adequately funded out of the public purse with a prime mission to provide critical and unfettered information and commentary on events which impinge on the well-being of society. The academics in such universities need to be tenured to enable them to speak, as appropriate, on such issues.

Nevertheless, the universities are in for some changes (Ruth Greenstein, Institute for Defense Analysis), a situation amplified by Frederick Betz (National Science Foundation) who described the current preferred way in which industry and universities could associate. Some 10-20 companies need to get together to form a consortium with a university to create a research center. The latter should have a program of applicable and innovative research work of an interdisciplinary nature and the center should involve, in some way, undergraduates in the overall program. When challenged that a group of companies could not consort to produce anything other than a sort of ‘lowest common denominator’ kind of research, Betz drew attention to the protein-folding work of the MIT Biotechnology Center. However, while the virtuosity of these investigations is unquestioned the translation of this work into useful pharmaceuticals has yet to be achieved. Optimism in the essential synergy of university/industry interaction was expressed by Roland Schmitt (American Institute of Physics) and Vic Esposito (Microcarb Inc.). But there were problems which had to be ironed out to achieve the full flowering of the potential. Problems remained in the differences in culture of the two organizations and, in particular, whether or not the universities were going to be overwhelmed by the burgeoning requirements to delve into the Conflict of Interest (Col) issue.

Michael Davis (Illinois Institute of Technology), Robert Charrow (Crowell & Moring) and Blumenthal provided a welter of material to define the state wherein there exists a Col. Blumenthal quoted David Thompson (a Harvard philosopher) in defining Col as a “set of conditions affecting judgements where a primary interest is affected by a secondary interest.” In the health-care area, primary interests might be the well-being of the patients, the integrity of the research and the education of students, while the secondary, not unreasonable, interests could be financial gain above that obtained as a university salary, possession of shares in a company whose products one is testing, a position on the management board or scientific advisory board of a company whose research interests overlap with those in the academic’s department. It is clear that the