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LETTERS

THE TRUTH ABOUT SPORTS DRINKS

Industry-university research contracts are damaging

David Packham *honorary fellow*

Materials Research Centre, University of Bath, Bath BA2 7AY, UK

It is widely recognised that many prominent drug companies exert a nefarious effect on clinical research through abusing university sponsorship and confidentiality agreements in research contracts. Angell's long editorial experience at the *New England Journal of Medicine* led her to comment "[i]t is simply no longer possible to believe much of the clinical research . . . published."¹

Heneghan and colleagues highlight the dubious scientific basis of manufacturers' claims that sports drinks enhance performance.² One of the companies criticised by Angell—Glaxo-Smith-Kline—is deeply involved in promoting sports drinks. The secrecy over industry-university research contracts described in the study,² and the readiness of industry funded academics to attack its conclusions, suggest that similar abuse may occur in this field.

Most medical journals, including the *BMJ*, require authors to publish potential conflicts of interest, but few of the journals that support the claims of sports drinks manufacturers do.

Despite their putative devotion to the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, British universities are reluctant to adopt effective safeguards. The Economic and Social Research Council insists on the independence and impartiality of its funded research, and that conflicts of interest are made explicit,³ yet it is far from

clear that universities have adopted such safeguards for other sources of funding. The University of Bath requires only that conflicts are discussed with the head of department and not that they are made explicit in publications. Similarly, "funding sources and significant collaboration and all commercial, financial or other 'interest' relating to the work" may be kept secret if "anonymity has been agreed."⁴

The serious damage, Angell described, to the integrity of North American universities after financially rewarding, but intellectually fraught, industrial research contracts are undertaken is already occurring in the UK.⁵

Competing interests: None declared.

- 1 Angell M. Drug companies and doctors: a story of corruption. *New York Review of Books* 2009 January 15.
- 2 Heneghan C, Perera R, Nunan D, Mahtani K, Gill P. Forty years of sports performance research and little insight gained. *BMJ* 2012;345:e4797. (19 July.)
- 3 Economic and Social Research Council. Research ethics framework. www.gold.ac.uk/media/ESRC_Re_Ethics_Frame_tcm6-11291.pdf.
- 4 University of Bath. Code of good practice in research. Revised framework. 2011.
- 5 Health Care Renewal. The Blumsohn case: "rent-a-researcher?" 2005. <http://hcrenewal.blogspot.com/2005/12/more-summary-and-much-documentation-of.html>.

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