

By **Thomas P. Stossel, M.D.**, CO-DIRECTOR OF THE HEMATOLOGY DIVISION AT BRIGHAM & WOMEN'S HOSPITAL IN BOSTON AND AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY PROFESSOR OF MEDICINE AT HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL.

# Free the Scientists!

**Conflict-of-interest rules purport to cure a problem that doesn't exist—  
and are stifling medical progress.**

FOR THREE DECADES I HAVE TREATED PATIENTS WITH BLOOD diseases and run a medical research laboratory funded mostly by government grants. My career has been rewarding, but now, as I work with companies to translate my research into clinically useful products, I find that academic institutions, leaders of prestigious medical journals and even government agencies consider such commercial contact to be deeply troubling.

Last year the National Institutes of Health tightened restrictions on scientists' freedom to consult with pharmaceutical companies. Harvard Medical School, where I am a professor, also limits my ability to work with drug companies. If I have more than a token financial interest in a company, I can't let that company sponsor my scientific work. The theory behind the rules is that a financial interest causes an academic scientist to lose objectivity and report biased results. In the real world, however, these restrictions address nearly nonexistent scientific corruption and ultimately impede medical progress by depriving pharmaceutical companies of access to biomedical scholars.

Academic-industry relationships have been overwhelmingly beneficial. The biotechnology industry, founded by entrepreneurial academics in the early 1980s, introduced highly effective products like vaccines, hormones and anti-cancer drugs. Companies like Amgen, Biogen Idec, Chiron and Genentech, which emerged from this synergy between universities and business, contribute enormously to our economy.

A 1998 paper in the *New England Journal of Medicine* is often invoked as proof that financial interests cause bias. But the article's data did not support its conclusion that the medical profession needed more rules. The journal reported that cardiologists consulting for companies were less critical of a controversial medication, a calcium channel blocker, than other academics. But the cardiologists' views were identical whether consulting for the drug's manufacturer or for firms making competing products. And the drug in question remains in wide use.

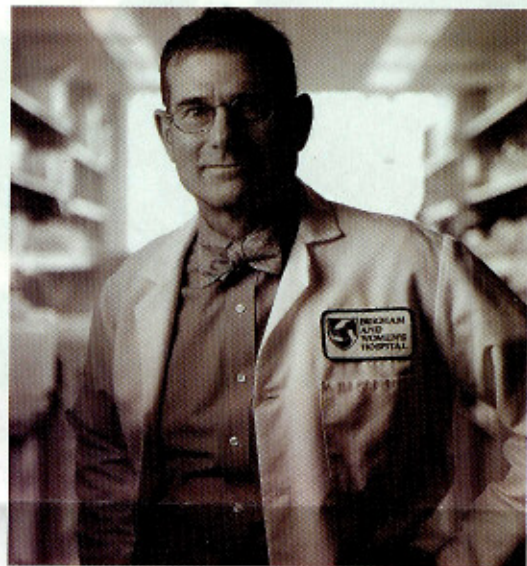
The death of 18-year-old Jesse Gelsinger is the defining event used to justify restrictions on research. Researchers' financial relationships with a sponsoring company dominated the publicity surrounding his 1999 death during a gene therapy experiment gone awry at the University of Pennsylvania. But no evidence suggested that financial interests caused the tragedy. Plenty of deaths have resulted from clinical experiments with no commercial ties.

Despite enormous growth in joint projects between universities and industry, the incidence of fabrication or falsification of research results reported to NIH's Office of Research Integrity has barely changed over the last decade. None of the reported cases has involved researchers' commercial relationships.

How did financial conflict-of-interest rules get to be such a big deal? One reason is that the gatekeepers of the medical literature believe it is. Editors of high-profile medical journals vilify the pharmaceutical industry, provide forums for antibusiness critics, tout theoretical evils of conflict-of-interest and promote an idealized view of research. The ideological commentaries appear side by side with peer-reviewed scientific reports, thus carrying the weight of objective truth to reporters and to the public.

To be sure, it is reasonable to require disclosure of corporate sponsorship by investigators and institutional monitoring of collaborations. But academic administrators and government officials respond to rare incidents of misconduct and to the barrage of criticism that follows by rushing to pile on restrictions. Their argument is that the mere appearance of a conflict undermines the public trust. This moralism panders to a natural impulse to feel superior to businesspeople and bullies the entrepreneurial minority among academics.

The public wants trustworthy science, and it can get that without new ethical rules. Even more, it wants results—lives saved—and it can't get those if commercial sponsorship of research is made difficult, or impossible.



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