

Invitation to an open scientific discussion

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Recently, the results of a 90-day feeding study with genetically engineered plants have been published in our journal (Zeljenková et al. 2014). The subchronic study showed that engineered maize at a level of up to 33 % in the diet did not cause adverse effects in rats. This article incited some criticism by Bauer-Panskus and Then (2014). The authors claim that the article of Zeljenková et al. has been ‘manipulated’ and should be withdrawn (Bauer-Panskus and Then 2014). However, scientific arguments were not presented to our journal. A withdrawal process requires that the arguments are presented to the editors and authors. Next, the authors must have a fair chance to respond and defend their conclusions. To guarantee an open and fair procedure, we invite everyone who wishes to comment on this study (Zeljenková et al. 2014) to publish their arguments in our journal. Of course, the authors will be given the opportunity to respond. The editors of the Archives of Toxicology believe that such an open and public scientific discussion is the most efficient way to find the truth and widen our knowledge.

Besides the alleged manipulation argument, Bauer-Panskus and Then (2014) claim that it ‘is unacceptable that this study (Zeljenková et al. 2014) was published in the Archives of Toxicology,’ because I, as the editor, and other editorial board members ‘have current and past ties to industry’ (Bauer-Panskus and Then 2014). This argument is difficult to understand. The authors of an article cannot be made responsible for the real or alleged industry ties of an editor. Moreover, it is not correct that I am funded or

influenced by industry.¹ I have never received money or favors from industry. I have also never served as a paid industry consultant and have no undisclosed financial ties to industry. Furthermore, and to avoid any misunderstanding, it is not my opinion that cooperation projects funded by either the chemical or pharmaceutical industry are unethical by default. However, none of my projects, past or present, have been supported by these industries; rather, until now, my research has been funded by research grants from the European Union, the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and the German Research Foundation (DFG). For transparency, the research institution where I am employed (Leibniz Research Centre for Working Environment and Human Factors, Dortmund, Germany) lists all funding sources on its public website (<http://www.ifado.de/>).

Besides my alleged, but nonexistent, ties to industry, Bauer-Panskus and Then (2014) suggest yet another ‘conflict of interest’ of myself and in a strange twist use this alleged conflict to request withdrawal of the article of Zeljenková et al. (2014): In one of my previous publications (Hengstler et al. 2011), coauthors have worked in a chemical company or as industry consultants. What a surprise that this publication was chosen to construct a conflict of interest against me, as it represents a consensus paper of the Advisory Committee of the German Society of Toxicology (GT). Its background is clearly explained in the published conflict of interest section found on pages 265 and

¹ Recently, an article has been published in Lab Times insinuating that I have financial ties to industry (Lab Times 3–2014). However, in the meantime Lab Times has revoked this statement and did acknowledge that there was no evidence that I received industrial funding (Lab Times 5–2014, p. 47). The text in this editorial has partially already been published in my response letter to Lab Times (Lab Times 6–2016, p. 41).

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286 of the article. The Advisory Committee is elected by the members of the German Society of Toxicology (the largest scientific toxicology organization in Europe with more than 1,200 members) and consists of representatives from academia, industry and administration. The members of this committee present, discuss and justify the committee's activities to the other members of the society, for example, at its yearly meeting. When diverse scientific viewpoints hamper decision-making on a particular subject (as explained on page 265 of the article), additional experts are called upon for their input. The writing of such a consensus paper is a truly democratic process, albeit a time and labor intensive one. Therefore, we were bemused to see that Bauer-Panskus and Then (2014) use co-authorship of a consensus paper of an elected scientific society advisory committee to contrive a conflict of interest. Another reproach of Bauer-Panskus and Then (2014) is that editors or editorial board members of our journal have already published together with one of the authors of the criticized article. However, as for every scientific journal, there are clear rules for such situations. If one editorial board member has published with an author, the manuscript has to be managed by editorial board member(s) having no mutual publications. It would be unrealistic to reject manuscripts only if there has been co-authorship with an editorial board member, especially if the board of editors is large as in the case of our journal.

It is also not correct, when Bauer-Panskus and Then (2014) claim a 'clear lack of declaration of conflicts of interest,' since the authors of the criticized paper (Zeljenková et al. 2014) have published a conflict of interest statement at the end of their article. It is remarkable that Bauer-Panskus and Then (2014) on the one side accuse others of an alleged 'clear lack of declaration of conflicts of interest' but have an undeclared conflict of interest in their own article (Bauer-Panskus and Then 2014). The commentary of Bauer-Panskus and Then (2014) does not contain a conflict of interest statement although they are working for Testbiotech e.V., an organization sponsored by a large foodstuffs enterprise named tegut (<https://www.testbiotech.org/testbiotech>). This foodstuffs enterprise advertises its products

by stating that they do not contain genetically manipulated products.

This leads to the important question how to handle the present situation. There is certainly a consensus that it is not acceptable to hide a conflict of interest if someone joins a scientific discussion. However, it is even more unethical to misuse a real or alleged conflict of interest as a thought-terminating cliché and to distract from the actual scientific discussion. Therefore, we will not fuel a lengthy discussion about who has or has not conflict of interest. In reality, a person (or an organization) may have a conflict of interest but nevertheless good scientific arguments. The best way to find the truth is an open discussion where everyone is allowed to publish scientific arguments to finally allow the reader to draw his own conclusions. Therefore, we invite letters/commentaries up to 2,000 words which may contain up to ten references. Both sides (pro and contra the article) are encouraged to contribute. Scientific arguments will be published unchanged; however, commentaries with personal attacks will not be published. We are looking forward to the discussion.

References

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