



# Conflicting with Reality

Or, Scientists are Human, Too

by Iain Murray

Former *New England Journal of Medicine* editor Jerome Kassirer, in a recent *Washington Post* op ed, argues that conflicts of interest in medical science are so pervasive today that the new National Institutes of Health (NIH) cholesterol guidelines are somehow tainted—not because the guidelines are themselves wrong, but because of their authors. Resorting to an ad hominem argument of the worst kind, he goes on to preach his vision of scientific correctness.

Some members of NIH's National Cholesterol Education Program (NCEP), which wrote the guidelines, have in the past received research grants, consulting fees, and speaking honoraria from drug manufacturers. According to Dr. Kassirer, this alone should bring their advice into disrepute.

Kassirer's central point boils down to: You can't trust anyone who has ever been associated with a profit-making venture; therefore, such tainted souls should be banned forever from public advisory roles. Kassirer's vision of turning the virtues of capitalism into vices is a recipe for disaster, for public health and science.

According to Kassirer, financial interests bias people in favor of those who fund them. Therefore, any and all advice from scientists who have ever accepted money from a business is necessarily tainted. Disclosure of interests, he argues, does not work, because it tells us nothing about whether the potential bias did taint the advice. The only solution is

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to prohibit anyone with financial conflicts of interest from serving on public health advisory panels. Then those who wish to be respected as independent authorities will eschew such funding and all will be right with the world; their advice will be free from taint.

But would such advice really be untainted? Kassirer's prescription ignores the basic human desire for self-advancement. If someone has gone through the considerable

expense in time, money, and effort to become an expert in a given field, then that person can reasonably expect to profit from that skill set. By excluding those whose skills are most valuable, the public panels would exclude those most knowledgeable about the subject.

Such a ban would also reduce incentives to pursue scientific

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careers. If achieving financial success in science would involve having one's integrity impugned, then the most intelligent among us might view science as an unattractive career. The inability to profit sufficiently from scientific knowledge is the single biggest reason for the European brain drain to America.

Moreover, Kassirer ignores the very real biases from other sources. He appears never to have heard of the branch of economics known as public choice theory, whose principal thinker, James Buchanan, won a Nobel Prize in 1986. Essentially, public choice points out that politicians, regulators, and official bodies are no less self-interested than private industry. Therefore, those who receive their salaries ultimately from government are likely to argue in favor of more government.

Thus, a panel of supposedly disinterested academics might argue in favor of tighter regulation of pharmaceuticals in the knowledge that they will benefit from their government advisory roles. This might explain the unnecessary slowness of the Food and Drug Administration's new drug approval process, which every year costs thousands of lives of patients waiting for drugs to gain approval.

Contrary to Dr. Kassirer's apparent belief, there is no class of researchers immune to conflicts of interest. Suffice it to consider Kassirer's own potential conflict of interest. As his *Post* tagline says, he is the author of the forthcoming book, *On the Take: How Medicine's Complicity with Big Business*



*Can Endanger Your Health.* Kassirer stands to benefit from people worrying about this alleged “complicity,” since it might boost sales of his book. By his own logic, we should dismiss his alarmist claims as nothing more than a sales ploy. He is asking us not to trust him.

And financial gain is not the only motivation. Even if Kassirer were to give away all of his book sale profits, causes that he supports will benefit. For instance, Daniel Klein of Santa Clara University recently found that 75 percent of authors and all editors of the *Journal of Development Economics* have ties to international development institutions. That they might argue for more government funding for the organizations they support should not be surprising.

Conflicts of interest are a fact of life. Rather than try to eliminate them, the way to address them is to make people aware of them. Consider the ongoing acrimonious debate over media bias in America—centered on the shocking revelation that journalists have views of their own. In Britain, newspapers short-circuited that debate long ago by openly declaring their editorial policies. Without a pretense of objectivity, the public know what they’re really getting. Contra Dr. Kassirer, disclosure works.

If we accept that everyone acts out of self-interest, then we can also accept, as did Adam Smith in 1776, that society

benefits from people acting out of enlightened self-interest. He said, “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.”

This works just as much in science as it does in baking. While government-funded research can push scientific advancement along, the marketplace has proven much better at pulling it along. Repeated academic studies, cited by University of Buckingham clinical biochemist Terence Kealey in his book, *The Economic Laws of Scientific Research*, show that the consumer profits twice as much from an invention as the inventor.

Long before Adam Smith, the Roman statesman Cicero formulated the question “Cui bono” (who benefits?) to get to the root of who committed a crime. If the answer is “the American people,” as has been so often the case when industry has helped advance scientific knowledge, then it should be clear no offense has been committed. That is important to keep in mind before impugning scientists’ integrity simply because of their choice of employer.

*Iain Murray (imurray@cei.org) is a Senior Fellow at CEI, where he specializes in the debate over climate change and the use and abuse of science in the political process.*

# The Frankenfood Myth

## How Protest and Politics Threaten the Biotech Revolution

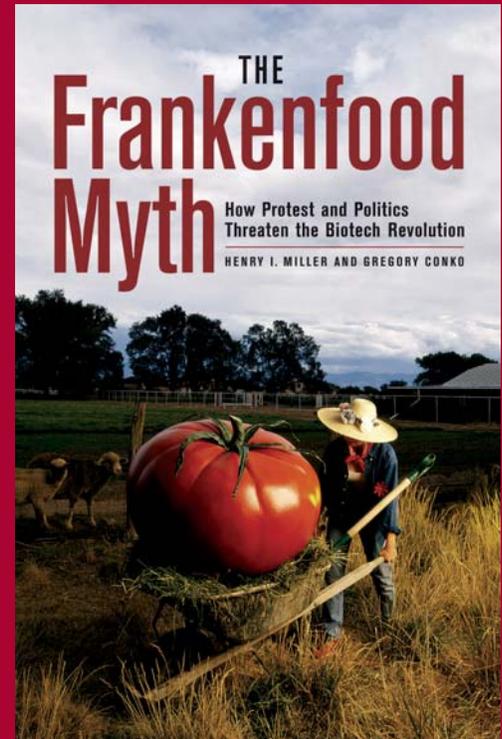
by Henry I. Miller and Gregory Conko

Foreword by Nobel Laureate  
Norman E. Borlaug

Prologue by John H. Moore

Praeger Publishers

In this provocative and meticulously researched book, Henry Miller and Gregory Conko trace the origins of gene-splicing, its applications, and the backlash from consumer groups and government agencies against so-called “Frankenfoods.” They explain how a “happy conspiracy” of anti-technology activism, bureaucratic over-reach, and business lobbying has resulted in a regulatory framework in which there is an inverse relationship between the degree of product risk and degree of regulatory scrutiny.



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