

## **The Lancet protests against its publisher's arms fair business**

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**T**he *Lancet*, long an influential international voice on the adverse health consequences of war and violence, is again calling on its publisher to sell its arms fairs. But this time, *The Lancet's* call is echoed by, among others, the *BMJ*, the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and an online petition with nearly 1000 signatories.

Reed Elsevier's science and medicine division, Elsevier, publishes 500 handbooks and journals, including *The Lancet*, while its subsidiary, Reed Exhibitions, hosts arms fairs around the world.

*The Lancet's* Editor-in-Chief Richard Horton says involvement in the arms trade is ethically incompatible with publishing a journal committed to global health. It's "unnecessary and extremely disturbing."

"We find ourselves in a situation where our parent company is filling an absolutely critical part in the arms trade. We're horrified and embarrassed and we want them to stop," says Horton, adding that *The Lancet* has had "endless" conversations with Reed Elsevier about the conflict.

Reed Elsevier refused an interview request, but instead issued a statement to *CMAJ* saying that "The company does not regard this as a conflict of interest, though we respect the right of others, even our own editorial staff, to disagree. We remain convinced that the defence industry is necessary to the preservation of freedom and national security and that these exhibitions assist in ensuring there is a licensed, regulated and open market to serve bona fide individuals and reputable companies in this sector."

As early as 2005, a *Lancet* editorial "respectfully" asked "Reed Elsevier to divest itself of all business interests that threaten human and especially civilian health and well-being" (2005;66:868).

In March, *The Lancet* ended an 18-month silence on the issue by publishing and responding to 6 letters (2007;369:987-90) from, among others, the UK's Royal College of Physicians and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

*The Lancet* editors responded to these letters by reaffirming their belief that arms exhibitions "have no legitimate place within the portfolio of a company whose core business concerns are health and science. This part of Reed Elsevier's operation should be divested as soon as possible." They also asserted that a growing number of Elsevier colleagues question Reed Elsevier's continued involvement in arms fairs.

On Mar. 23, 59 of *The Lancet's* 83 editorial consultants sent an Open Letter to Reed Elsevier's CEO, Sir Crispin Davis, giving him 3 weeks to respond to a series of questions concerning the company's involvement in arms fairs. That letter, which is hosted on *CMAJ's* Web site, was spearheaded by University of Ottawa law Professor Amir Attaran, a member of *CMAJ's* editorial writing team.

*CMAJ* Editor-in-Chief Dr. Paul Hébert says "I believe it is morally indefensible for a medical journal's owner to be involved in the arms industry in any way." (See related article on page 1266.) "We urge our international editorial journal colleagues, particularly those at Elsevier publications, to protest against Reed Elsevier's involvement in arms fairs."

Renewal of the controversy was, in part, prompted by an editorial in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* (2007;100:114-5) by former *BMJ* editor Richard Smith, as well as an online petition, an academic boycott and the decision by Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust to sell its £2 million stake in Reed Elsevier in protest.

The online petition, initiated by Tom Stafford, a lecturer in the Psychology Department at the University of Sheffield in the UK, has more than 1000 signatories (<http://jidiolct.org.uk/notes?p=632>), while the boycott, led by the Department of Mathematics at Ghent University in Belgium, has garnered about 70. The academics vow to stop sending papers to Reed Elsevier journals until the organi-



Courtesy of Reed Elsevier

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zation of arms fairs is discontinued (<http://cage.ugent.be/~npg/elsevier/>).

The *BMJ* called for a similar boycott in an editorial published on Mar. 17 (2007;334:547-8). It urged the scientific and health community to sign petitions, and for journal editors to "express their disgust at the company's arms trade activities." It concluded by asking researchers to "stop submitting their high profile randomized control trials to Reed Elsevier journals until links with arms trade are ended."

Horton says, "I strongly oppose a boycott of *The Lancet*. This will directly damage the journal and I am sad that professional colleagues might inadvertently seek to do so. The best course is continued advocacy and dialogue."

Horton stressed that *The Lancet* operates independently and ethically, within the Elsevier division.

"It's a fantastic home for *The Lancet* and we want to stay there. But we and other publishing colleagues in Elsevier find ourselves in a difficult position that is incompatible with the values we try to practise every day. It's unacceptable. We need them to go the whole way and get rid of their arms business."

Elsevier Science and Medicine is Reed Elsevier's most profitable arm with 2005 sales of \$1.4 billion, 37% of the company's total profits. — Barbara Sibbald, *CMAJ*

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