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Federal committee to review Pfizer v-p appointment to CIHR council

The federal health committee will review the government appointment of a Pfizer Canada vice-president to the governing council of the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR).

“Having drug company executives deciding health research directions is like having the big bad wolf directing the three little pigs on how to build their homes,” Judy Wasylcia-Leis, NDP member for Winnipeg North, Manitoba, and vice-chair of the committee, said in a news release.

The order-in-council appointment of Dr. Bernard Prigent to the CIHR governing council was announced Oct. 5 by Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq. The review, approved by the 12-member Commons committee on Nov. 16, is scheduled for Nov. 30.

Prigent’s appointment sparked controversy among some physicians (*CMAJ* 2009.DOI:10.105.1503/cmaj.109-3085) and concern has mounted among academics and researchers.

The appointment is “very surprising and quite inappropriate,” said Dr. Patricia Baird, university distinguished professor with the department of medical genetics at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

“Many governments, medical journals and health organizations are becoming much more aware of issues of conflict of interest, so for this appointment to be made in this climate, when people are so much more aware, is surprising,” says Baird, who has served on the Medical Research Council and the National Advisory Board on Science and Technology.

The appointment “can only open the CIHR itself to suspicions of conflicting interests,” Abby Lippman, professor of epidemiology, biostatistics and occupational health at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, wrote in a letter to CIHR President Alain Beaudet.

But Dr. Carolyn Bennett, Liberal MP for the Toronto, Ontario, riding of St Paul’s and a member of the health committee, said in an email that she was assured by governing council members that “because part of the mandate of the CIHR is getting research to market . . . expertise from the business side was important to fill out the skill set and expertise of the governing council.”

Dr. Prigent’s role as chair of the scientific research committee of the Rx&D Health Research Foundation “demonstrates broader experience than just one company,” she added. Rx&D is the trade association for the brand-name pharmaceutical industry in Canada.

But law professor Jocelyn Downie of Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, said pharmaceutical company representatives “do not belong at the table setting

policy, directions and strategies for publicly funded research. . . . The interests of the pharmaceutical industry are not aligned with the interests of the public.”

If the governing council wants input from the pharmaceutical industry, it can invite representatives to meetings to make presentations, said Downie, who holds a Canada Research Chair in health law and policy.

Pfizer is an “especially” bad choice to have representation on the governing body for Canada’s health granting agency, she added.

Downie noted that in July, Pfizer Inc., the parent of Pfizer Canada, paid US\$75 million to Kano State in northern Nigeria in an out-of-court settlement for 1996 drug trials that Nigerian officials allege led to the deaths of 11 children.

In September, Pfizer Inc. paid US\$2.3 billion in fines and penalties — the largest such fine paid by a pharmaceutical company — because it marketed four drugs for off-label uses. One of those drugs, the painkiller valdecoxib (Bextra), was pulled from the market in the United States and Canada in 2005 because of safety issues identified by the US Food and Drug Administration and Health Canada. Off-label uses are those for which drugs have not received approval for marketing from the federal regulatory body and for which there may be inadequate, or no, safety data.

Morris Barer, director of the Centre for Health Services and Policy Research at the University of British Columbia, notes that members of the CIHR’s governing council “are expected to take off and leave their daily hats at the door, before assuming GC [governing council] responsibilities.” Members are also expected to ensure CIHR meets its objectives of improving the health of Canadians and strengthening the Canadian health care system, he says.

But like Downie, Barer finds a problem with “the track record of this particular organization” and the fact that a senior company representative is sitting at a table “expected to set ethical standards for the country around the conduct of health research and the transparency of research results.” — Ann Silversides, *CMAJ*

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