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Milwaukee's Best No Longer

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A brewing ethical brouhaha at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel illustrates the hazards of politicized science reporting.

In an era of partisan journalism, some have presumed that at least one area of reporting, science, was insulated from blatant bias. After all, there are facts, and it's presumably easy to identify when data is being cooked. But that's naive, and a brewing ethical brouhaha at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel underscores how the public can be short-changed when ideology, ambition, or hubris takes precedence over a news organization's public responsibility to report controversies in context.

This incident erupted after a comprehensive review of plastic additive bisphenol A (BPA) by the German Society of Toxicology was published two weeks ago in *Critical Reviews in Toxicology*, a prestigious international journal. BPA is used to add strength and flexibility to many plastic products, from the protective lining of metal cans to bottles to dental sealants.

Over the past few years, the dominant narrative among select publications—the Journal Sentinel, most notably—is that BPA is dangerous to humans, infants, and pregnant women in particular, because it distorts development. Because of this, some have labeled it an "endocrine disruptor." Indeed, it does subtly alter the way hormones in our endocrine system work, as do many chemicals, including soy, nuts, wheat, and berries. The "BPA is harmful" thesis never gained mainstream acceptance among scientists—no regulatory panel in the world has recommended restricting BPA based on the evidence, although political bodies have imposed restrictions, partly because of public perceptions stirred by articles in the Journal Sentinel and other publications.

Regulatory Agencies Weigh In

In January 2010, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) released its second review of BPA in two years, reiterating past conclusions that BPA "is not proven to harm children or adults" and that studies to date support "the safety of current low levels of human exposure to BPA." It noted that some tests had shown biological activity in animal tests. Under intense public pressure, the FDA said it would join other agencies in reviewing BPA's effects on fetuses and children. But it expressed skepticism of the "novel" endocrine disruptor hypothesis, stating that rodent studies suggesting some problems were not "experimentally consistent."

The FDA did not elevate any of its levels of concern, continuing to express “some concerns” over animal tests, which is government “regulatory speak” for “we need more studies.” When asked if children faced health dangers, Joshua Sharfstein, MD, the agency's principal deputy commissioner, minced no words: “The FDA is not saying that it's unsafe to use a baby bottle with BPA ... FDA does support the use of bottles with BPA because the benefit of nutrition outweighs the potential risk of BPA ... If we thought it was unsafe, we would be taking strong regulatory action.”

Many news organizations reported it straight. Leftist site Tree Hugger headlined: “FDA on BPA: It has ‘Some Concern.’ But Not Much.” The Journal Sentinel characterized the FDA's affirmation of its current regulations as an “about face,” which it clearly was not.

Then last summer, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) reviewed more than 800 new studies and rejected the contention that BPA causes human neurological damage, one of the Journal Sentinel's primary contentions. Still, some scientists, and the media outlets that had relied on their work almost exclusively, were reluctant to reexamine their “BPA is harmful” dogma. A slew of new findings were either played down or ignored entirely by the Journal Sentinel, which had won a passel of awards in 2009 and 2010 and was a Pulitzer finalist for reporting, in starkly black and white terms, that BPA harms humans and should be heavily restricted.

It's in that context that this new review by a special advisory committee of German toxicologists was widely awaited by regulators around the world. The study embraced the findings of the FDA and the EFSA, declaring that BPA posed no substantive risks. It explained in comprehensive detail how the endocrine disruptor notion managed to convince so many journalists and even some scientists for so many years.

Initially, the German study did not find its way into many media outlets. Silence prevailed at the Journal Sentinel. Then all hell broke loose when one of its columnists broke ranks and posted a column on the paper's website. “‘No noteworthy risk,’ says big German toxicological panel,” wrote Patrick McIlheran, linking to an article I had written earlier in the week for The American about the German study.

McIlheran's column stirred a fierce debate on the paper's website. Things then took an ethically tortuous turn when the paper's managing editor, George Stanley, who had overseen the paper's BPA coverage, publicly rebuked his own columnist in an online comment that followed the article: “The acknowledgments section reveals that the scientists all have financial ties to the plastics industry—just as we have found over and over again, regarding this \$7 billion product.”

According to McIlheran, before Stanley posted his scold, he had raked McIlheran over the coals in numerous phone conversations for challenging the paper's award-winning conclusion. McIlheran was stunned, he says, because he doesn't report directly to Stanley, but to the editor of the opinion page, which is supposed to be separated from the news side by a firewall. The editor's post—characterized by one admiring liberal blogger as “sandbagging a columnist”—unleashed an Internet torrent of criticism on McIlheran.

Ethics Observers Question Editor, Paper

Stanley's reproof astonished journalist ethics observers. “It's inappropriate, to say the least,” says James Madison University's Kevin Smith, past president of the Society of Professional Journalists

and head of its ethics committee. “If an editor has legitimate editorial concerns, or he believes a reporter didn’t put facts into proper context, this has to be addressed in the news or opinion pages, not in open attacks, on the phone or in print.”

Kelly McBride, head of ethics at the Poynter Institute, echoed Smith, saying that Stanley has a responsibility to correct the public record and in the forum in which it was made.

Stanley’s ethical missteps were compounded by the fact that he was dead wrong in asserting the review had stated that all nine authors had “financial ties to the industry.” The paper’s “Declaration of interest” section states that one scientist worked for a drug manufacturer with a division that made BPA; two others were former government officials involved in risk assessment; as for the six other scientists, “Authors Hengstler, Foth, Gebel, Kramer, Lilienblum, and Wollin report no conflicts of interest.” The authors also declared that “no external funding was obtained” for the study.

WTMJ Milwaukee’s Charlie Sykes called Stanley out for his misleading “smackdown” and multiple blunders: “[R]ather than reporting the story, one of the paper’s top editor chose to attack the scientists...and appears to have gotten it wrong,” he concluded.

“Stanley appears to have thrown one of his reporters under the bus to protect what he believes is the sanctity of those journalism awards,” adds SPJ ethicist Smith. “He even says he’s quoting from the acknowledgments section of the German report, which makes it seem as if his columnist was sloppy for not alerting readers to the alleged biases of the scientists, when actually he was the biased one.” The editor, he suggests, appears heavily invested in the controversial endocrine disruptor hypothesis, which is slowly losing favor in the international science community. “If the Journal Sentinel was really committed to truth, it would welcome new data and just report factually on developments. That’s the way science and journalism should work. It seems the editor was more committed to presenting his version of the truth.”

I sent the paper’s top executives numerous inquiries about whether Stanley would issue a correction or retraction or how the paper would be handling the ethical issues, but received no reply. A response, of sorts, appeared in Thursday’s paper. According to sources inside the Journal Sentinel, in anticipation of this article, Stanley contacted the lead reporter on its BPA investigation, Susanne Rust, who had left the paper for California Watch, an environmental advocacy organization with a clear position on this issue. In a “guest article” posted on the paper’s website titled “New BPA Report linked to industry,” Rust does not examine any of the factual evidence cited in the German review. She glowingly touts the Journal Sentinel for examining nearly 260 studies, and does not directly address Stanley’s false statement that “the scientists all have financial ties to the plastics industry.” Instead she issues vague, damning innuendos about four scientists without even naming them or providing specifics beyond the one case cited in the report itself.

Rust also attacks the credibility of STATS, the organization that houses the Genetic Literacy Project, where I work. She falsely claims it is funded by “ideological groups with a deep anti-regulatory bent,” citing the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation, and the Cato Institute—none of which give STATS money. Even if it such allegations were true, it is irrelevant even as a matter of context. The Genetic Literacy Project, which I founded and brought to STATS, gets no money from STATS or any of the groups named—zero dollars; it’s housed at STATS and George Mason University.

Ironically, Stanley’s and Rust’s *ad hominem* attacks would have been no less ethically challenged

had they been correct, and the German scientists had close industry ties. Professional associations are data points and may or may not be compromising, although they should be (and were, in this case) disclosed for context, as journals require. But conflict of interests can cut all kinds of ways. Endocrine disruption is a hot area, with universities, advocacy groups and governments, including the United States under the stimulus, offering tens of millions of dollars to research the hypothesis, often with an *a priori* expectation that problems will be found. Needless to say, negative findings are not rewarded with lucrative grants or public notoriety in papers like the *Journal Sentinel* or in glowing articles circulated by *California Watch*.

One of the key findings of the independent German review is that the research landscape is littered with “explorative” studies on handfuls of rats showing “biological activity,” but such results have not been reproduced in follow-up studies. Regulators have compared those inconsistent, small-scale, hypothesis-driven studies with more comprehensive analyses—indeed, some often funded by industry, as required by government regulators—that show no or extremely limited modifying effects. But no company or industry group funded or oversaw this study. It was initiated by the German Society of Toxicology as an independent inquiry precisely to respond to the public controversy stirred by the media.

Richard Sharpe, director of the Centre for Reproductive Biology at the Medical Research Institute in Edinburgh and Europe’s top expert on endocrine disruption, had long embraced the BPA-is-harmful hypothesis. Last year, as a clearer scientific picture of BPA emerged, he changed his mind. In a stunning article in *Toxicological Sciences*, he wrote, “As scientists, we all like our ideas and hypotheses to be proved correct; yet, there is equal merit in being proved wrong.” Sharpe now publicly advocates that governments stop diverting precious research funds into studying the endocrine effects of BPA, which he suggests is a dead-horse theory. Ultimately, he says, the evidence stands on its own—regardless of who funds the research. The missing step is that journalists have to report objectively what science finds.

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FURTHER READING: Entine’s earlier article provoking this exchange is “A Toxic Setback for Anti-Plastic Campaigners.” He also wrote “Genetics and Health 2.0 vs. the Old Guard,” “Wherefore Art Thou, Green Obama,” “Plastic Wars: Science Loses in Renewed Campaign against Plasticizers,” and “Biotech: Is Organic GM the Answer?”

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