

More than one bad apple

A congressional investigation alleges that some researchers have failed to report all the drug-company money that they have received — and that universities may have been too slow to police them.

The case of Charles Nemeroff, who as chair of the psychiatry department at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, allegedly underreported his income from drug companies, offers some stark revelations. Not only does it seem that Nemeroff was able to skirt around rules for reporting income, but Emory's officials appeared unable to rein him in.

A string of internal Emory documents and e-mails made public last week after a hearing of the US Senate Committee on Finance, chaired by Senator Charles Grassley (Republican, Iowa), allege a web of consulting, lecturing and advisory-board relationships that Nemeroff maintained with 16 pharmaceutical companies. By obtaining figures from each of the companies and comparing them with Nemeroff's financial disclosure forms provided by Emory, the committee's investigators alleged that, in breach of university rules, he failed to report at least \$1.2 million in income that these relationships earned him between 2000 and 2006.

In fairness, Emory medical school's Conflict of Interest Committee conducted an in-house investigation of Nemeroff's consulting in 2004. The committee alleged that he had committed "serious" violations of rules on reporting financial interests. Nemeroff accordingly promised in writing to keep his consulting with drugmaker Glaxo-SmithKline (GSK) to less than \$10,000 annually — the threshold beyond which, under National Institutes of Health (NIH) rules, institutions must actively manage or eliminate entirely their NIH-funded researchers' conflicts.

GSK was of special concern because, from 2003 to 2008, Nemeroff was principal investigator on a \$4-million NIH grant examining five GSK antidepressant candidates. Figures given to Grassley's investigators by GSK allege that, despite his written promise, Nemeroff's compensation from the company totalled \$171,000, \$78,000 and \$33,000 in 2004, 2005 and 2006, respectively. His disclosure forms to Emory in those same years allegedly showed payments of \$9,999 per year, or of no specified amount.

Asked by *Nature* last week why Nemeroff was not disciplined in 2004 when his violations first emerged, the university responded that its 2004 internal report documenting his breach of the rules "speaks

for itself". It added that the public documents show that it has "worked diligently" with Nemeroff to manage his alleged conflicts of interest. The university also noted that it is planning a "thorough investigation" of the allegations made by Grassley and that it is emphasizing its disclosure policies to all staff members.

The 2004 report did indeed lay down the law to Nemeroff. Yet Emory officials did not audit his income to be sure that he had reformed. Nemeroff stepped down as psychiatry chair only earlier this month, on the eve of the first newspaper report detailing his actions. Of course, the university's financial interests are tied up in the case too. Some \$1.35 million of the NIH grant went to Emory for overhead costs. Nemeroff did not respond to *Nature's* requests for comment. However, in a statement issued by Emory, he said: "To the best of my knowledge, I have followed the appropriate University regulations concerning financial disclosures. ... I will cooperate fully and work with Emory to respond to the alleged conflicts of interest issues raised by Senator Grassley and his staff."

It is tempting to dismiss this case as a 'one-bad-apple' situation. But Nemeroff is the seventh academic psychiatrist this year that Grassley has exposed as allegedly underreporting drug-company income. His office says that there are more revelations to come. Grassley has begun pressuring the NIH to mete out real punishment — as in, pulling grants — to spur institutions to enforce proper reporting. The agency came close last week, when it imposed conditions on Emory requiring written assurance that proper disclosures have been made for every grant before it will give funds to the university. Departing NIH director, Elias Zerhouni, has also launched a time-intensive administrative revamp of the rules governing conflict-of-interest reporting by universities. His successor should make it a priority to speed up this process.

Grassley, meanwhile, has proposed a Physician Payments Sunshine Act. Introduced in Congress last year, it would legally oblige drug and device companies to post in a publicly accessible database all payments of more than \$500 that they make to physicians. This would markedly ease the task of universities in enforcing proper reporting, and would exonerate the many researchers who play by the rules but who are nonetheless being cast under a cloud by Grassley's investigation. Congress ought to pass the bill into law when it next convenes. ■

Cut-throat savings

In an attempt to boost its struggling economy, Italy's government is focusing on easy, but unwise, targets.

It is a dark and angry time for scientists in Italy, faced as they are with a government acting out its own peculiar cost-cutting philosophy. Last week, tens of thousands of researchers took to the streets to register their opposition to a proposed bill designed to

control civil-service spending (see page 840). If passed, as expected, the bill would dispose of nearly 2,000 temporary research staff, who are the backbone of the country's grossly understaffed research institutions — and about half of whom had already been selected for permanent jobs.

Even as the scientists were marching, Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right government, which took office in May, decreed that the budgets of both universities and research could be used as funds to shore up Italy's banks and credit institutes. This is not the first time that Berlusconi has targeted universities. In August, he signed a decree that cut

university budgets by 10% and allowed only one in five of any vacant academic positions to be filled. It also allowed universities to convert into private foundations to bring in additional income. Given the current climate, university rectors believe that the latter step will be used to justify further budget cuts, and that it will eventually compel them to drop courses that have little commercial value, such as the classics, or even basic sciences. As that bombshell hit at the beginning of the summer holidays, the implications have only just been fully recognized — too late, as the decree is now being transformed into law.

Meanwhile, the government's minister for education, universities and research, Mariastella Gelmini, has remained silent on all issues related to her ministry except secondary schools, and has allowed major and destructive governmental decisions to be carried through without raising objection. She has refused to meet with scientists and academics to hear their concerns, or explain to them the policies that seem to require their sacrifice. And she has failed to delegate an undersecretary to handle these issues in her place.

Scientific organizations affected by the civil-service bill have instead been received by the bill's designer, Renato Brunetta, minister of public administration and innovation. Brunetta maintains that little can be done to stop or change the bill — even though it is still being discussed in committees, and has yet to be voted on by both chambers. In a newspaper interview, Brunetta also likened researchers to *capitani di*

ventura, or Renaissance mercenary adventurers, saying that to give them permanent jobs would be “a little like killing them”. This misrepresents an issue that researchers have explained to him — that any country's scientific base requires a healthy ratio of permanent to temporary staff, with the latter (such as postdocs) circulating between solid, well equipped, permanent research labs. In Italy, scientists tried to tell Brunetta, this ratio has become very unhealthy.

The Berlusconi government may feel that draconian budget measures are necessary, but its attacks on Italy's research base are unwise and short-sighted. The government has treated research as just another expense to be cut, when in fact it is better seen as an investment in building a twenty-first-century knowledge economy. Indeed, Italy has already embraced this concept by signing up to the European Union's 2000 Lisbon agenda, in which member states pledged to raise their research and development (R&D) budgets to 3% of their gross domestic product. Italy, a G8 country, has one of the lowest R&D expenditures in that group — at barely 1.1%, less than half that of comparable countries such as France and Germany.

The government needs to consider more than short-term gains brought about through a system of decrees made easy by compliant ministers. If it wants to prepare a realistic future for Italy, as it should, it should not idly reference the distant past, but understand how research works in Europe in the present. ■

Meeting expectations

Scientists need to ask themselves if their meeting or conference is really necessary.

This week, *Nature* publishes the last in a series of essays on ‘Meetings that Changed the World’, with an account of a conference held in 1986 in Santa Fe, New Mexico, that helped launch the human genome project (see page 876).

The meetings highlighted in the series were unusual in that they deployed the latest science in support of larger goals. Yet most scientific meetings do not aspire to such heights. Indeed, scientists these days rarely expect to hear much new science at a conference; rather, the greatest value of meetings comes from interaction and networking. At the same time, there are now so many meetings that it is impossible for scientists to attend more than a fraction of what is on offer. So are scientific meetings really necessary?

The traditional scientific conference performs many functions. The power of face-to-face contact in generating new thinking, ideas, networks and collaborations cannot be underestimated. Moreover, increasing work and time pressures make it more important than ever to escape the daily grind and meet colleagues from around the world. Another function of scientific conferences is often to generate income for universities and learned societies, not to mention the profitable industry of conference organization.

The ever-increasing number of scientific meetings is cause for concern. Yes, the pace of science is quickening. But the proliferation of meetings is sometimes influenced as much by researchers wanting to pad out their CVs, and by the prestige conferred on an institution by

hosting such an event, as it is with a desire for real intellectual exchange. All too often, meetings lack clarity of purpose and seem hastily constructed. This is particularly the case with ‘me-too’ conferences held to capitalize on a topical issue, such as avian flu. And the economic crisis, along with the rising costs of air travel and its impact on climate change, argues for greater parsimony and prioritization of conferences.

If a conference is absolutely necessary, some basic guidelines are in order. First and foremost, organizers need to be clear about a meeting's aims and objectives. Second, the number and length of formal presentations could be reduced. Attendees can now digest content before conferences begin, for example using wikis, social networks and other online tools, which leaves more time for face-to-face discussion, brainstorming and the all-important networking breaks at the event itself. Such measures would also make the content of conferences and workshops accessible to those unable to attend — particularly students, scientists from poorer countries and scientists from other, less-related fields. Third, more meetings should be webcast live, with videos archived online and linked to associated content such as papers presented, live blogging and other social networking.

Technology cannot — at least for the time being — match the power of direct interaction. Conferences are where reputations are forged — the humble poster session remains important for up-and-coming researchers to get themselves noticed and as a place for discussion. Online networking itself works better with people who know one another personally, and collaborations flow naturally from people who enjoy good relationships.

All of this means that scientific conferences are necessary and retain an important role in the research enterprise — but also that more careful thought needs to be exercised before sending out yet another call for papers. ■