LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

RE: "INVITED COMMENTARY: RESPONSE TO SCIENCE ARTICLE, 'EPIDEMIOLOGY FACES ITS LIMITS'"

Dr. Wynder’s recent commentary (1) on Gary Taubes’ unflattering report on the state of the science in epidemiology (2) contains one point that we believe needs wide discussion by epidemiologists. Dr. Wynder refers to an inherent “wish bias,” namely, interpreting studies according to an a priori personal preference, that supposedly occurs more frequently in studies coming from industry. This sentiment, unfortunately not uncommon, is prejudicial. Taken at face value, it assumes without evidence that scientists employed or sponsored by industry are less committed to the goals of epidemiology than are non-industry epidemiologists. In a 1990 paper, Wynder et al. (3) framed “wish bias” differently stating, “… a most compelling ‘wish bias’ adversely affecting good science is the preference of investigators to publish positive results” [emphasis ours]. Both statements illustrate an alarming trend toward focusing on investigators’ affiliations and/or presumed motives in the evaluation of epidemiologic research. This practice draws attention from scientific issues and, in that way, detracts from the state of epidemiologic science.

REFERENCES

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THE AUTHOR REPLIES

Drs. Acquavella and Ramlow (1) infer from my commentary (2) on the Science article, “Epidemiology Faces Its Limits” (3), that I regard scientists employed or supported by industry as “less committed to the goals of epidemiology” (1, p. 476) than those not employed or supported by industry. I wish to make clear that I did not question the commitment nor am I doubting the personal integrity and ability of scientists working as industrial employees or under other forms of contract to industry. I have, in fact, had the satisfaction of working with many of them. Perhaps the term “bias” was not accurate when I should rather have referred to the phenomenon of “publishing constraints.” Such constraints can be placed on investigators on the basis of legal or proprietary concerns when it comes to interpreting and publishing research results.

In terms of the wish bias, which may be regarded as an inherent part of human nature, it would seem self-evident that those of us who produce products would hope that they have no harmful side effects, whereas some researchers in academia as well as some reviewers and editors would prefer to report positive results, an aspect that in part led to the review in Science (3). In spite of some of these reservations and inherent problems even with the best conducted studies in epidemiology, I am sure that, whether from industry or academia, we all agree epidemiology has and will continue to make new contributions to our understanding of the pathogenesis of diseases and their prevention.

REFERENCES