



Response to House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee inquiry on research integrity

10th March 2017

Sense about Science is an independent charity that challenges the misrepresentation of science and scientific evidence in public life. We advocate for openness and honesty about research findings, and work to ensure the public interest in sound science and evidence is represented and recognised in public discussion and policy making.

Sense about Science runs the AllTrials campaign which calls for all past and present clinical trials to be registered and their full methods and summary results reported. The AllTrials campaign is providing a separate submission for this inquiry. However there are two other areas under the terms of this inquiry that we would like to bring the committee's attention.

A single, publicly searchable database of all government-commissioned research

In June 2015 Sense about Science began an inquiry into whether the government is reporting the policy research it commissions, following a spate of accusations of suppression of inconvenient results. Led by the former Appeal Court judge, Rt Hon Sir Stephen Sedley, its report *Missing Evidence* was published in June 2016.¹ The inquiry revealed widespread confusion in the way research commissioned by government is handled, both internally and with the public:

- There are significant differences in the way departments report and record research;
- 11 government departments were unable to provide a list of research they have commissioned;
- Of these, seven said that they did not hold that information centrally and it would be too costly to gather.
- Civil servants who gave evidence to the inquiry reported that departments spend significant time trying to find past studies that they commissioned and paid for.

Sir Stephen recommended a research register for government-commissioned research, having discovered that some departments already have a register and manage it perfectly well. A research register, along with clearer contracts and rules about publication, would give the public confidence that information is not being kept from them and give researchers confidence in working with government.

¹ Sense about Science (2016) "Missing Evidence" <https://researchinquiry.org/documents/10/MissingEvidence-DigitalPDF-SinglePages.pdf>

Safeguarding independence in research contracts

A second issue that we believe should be addressed to improve people's ability to access and use the best available evidence is greater clarity about the nature of research contracts between academic and commercial organisations. Accusations of conflicts of interest and corporate funding are used to undermine public confidence in the way that particular findings have been generated. This is not without foundation!^{2,3}. However, an interest in itself does not inherently present a conflict⁴. Conflicts themselves may be an indicator to look for bias but do not amount to it. Furthermore, among these kinds of accusations we see very different circumstances being conflated, from external funding of pre-existing programmes elsewhere in an institution employing a researcher, to paying doctors for recommendations with nice holidays. This is a poor guide to scientific validity and it is not helping with safeguarding the independence of research: contracts remain confused and unclear; researchers tell us they don't know what to look for in proposed terms and conditions; and it is clear that journalists and other scrutinisers don't always know what to ask when presented with the results.

Forty-five per cent of UK expenditure on research and development between 2007 and 2013 was from business⁵. The recent UK Government green paper on UK industry strategy called for an even greater collaboration between academia and industry⁶. Despite what Minister for Universities and Science Jo Johnson MP has acknowledged in response to our questions about this⁷, the industrial strategy as it stands, does not set out guidance for researchers.

Sense about Science is working with a small group of scientific institutions to explore a cross-discipline practice guide on external research contracts. This would provide more nuanced consideration of such external partnerships, both externally (eg by the public and the media) and internally with better understanding among parties about the principles and options regarding research governance. This initiative will need the support of the national academies and government to take it forward.

In addition, while this government encourages academic-corporate research partnerships, it stays silent when researchers who have undertaken industry-funded research are attacked and there is no

² Perlis RH, et al. (2005). Industry sponsorship and financial conflict of interest in the reporting of clinical trials in psychiatry. *Am J Psychiatry* 162(10):1957–60.

³ . Wang AT, et al. (2010). Association between industry affiliation and position on cardiovascular risk with rosiglitazone: cross sectional systematic review. *BMJ* 340:c1344.

⁴ Academy of Medical Sciences (2015) Perspectives on "Conflicts of Interest". <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/file-download/41514-572ca1ddd6cca.pdf>

⁵ The Royal Society (2015) "UK research and the European Union The role of the EU in funding UK research" <https://royalsociety.org/~media/policy/projects/eu-uk-funding/uk-membership-of-eu.pdf>

⁶ HM Government (2017) "Building Our Industrial Strategy". https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/586626/building-our-industrial-strategy-green-paper.pdf

⁷ Jo Johnson MP, Minister for Universities and Science: *"I do think we need to ensure that when we're encouraging science to collaborate with industry and to get closer to industry we do need to make sure we're backing them and giving them the support that they need. [...] It should be relatively straightforward for institutions to demonstrate that they've got codes of governance, codes of practice, that mean that such concerns shouldn't be easily bandied about by media."*⁷

evidence of bias. The government must do a lot more to support these researchers and promote a wider understanding of research governance. Our national funding agencies could also review the support they give to monitoring and reviewing bias across particular fields, so that we can understand where it is undermining research rather than just allege that it is or ignore areas that are not in receipt of particular types of funding.

We would be pleased to provide more to the committee on any of the above points.

Tracey Brown, Dr Chris Peters & Emily Jesper-Mir

Sense about Science

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