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News

US psychiatrist is fired from radio programme for not disclosing drug company ties

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¹ New York

Frederick Goodwin, an eminent US psychiatrist, has been fired as host of a popular radio programme after Senator Charles Grassley revealed that the doctor had received \$1.2m (£0.8m; €0.9m) in speaking fees and \$100 000 in expenses from GlaxoSmithKline since 2000 (*Congressional Record*, 19 Nov, pp S10641-4, "Payments to Radio Host")

The award winning programme, *The Infinite Mind*, was carried on two satellite channels of National Public Radio (NPR). It was produced by an independent company, Lichtenstein Creative Media, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Dr Goodwin began hosting the programme in 1998.

NPR issued a statement saying that all programmes on the satellite channels were "expected to adhere to the same code of ethics and practices that apply to programs produced and distributed by NPR. It appears that *The Infinite Mind* was in direct violation of that code, and is being removed from the channel."

Bill Lichtenstein, head of the media company, denied that his company knew Dr Goodwin had ties to industry that put its programme in breach of NPR's code. He said, "We were aware that Dr Goodwin had previously had involvement in the areas of education and research with pharmaceutical companies. However, what we were not aware of, at any time, until we received the call from Gardiner Harris at the *New York Times* on 20 November 2008, was that he had business and marketing relationships with pharmaceutical companies, even though he was required under his strict conflict of interest agreement that he signed to disclose those relationships to us."

Senator Grassley, an Iowa Republican, has been investigating financial links between doctors and drug companies for some time (*BMJ* 2008;337:a2363, doi:10.1136/bmj.a2363; 2008;337:a2315, doi:10.1136/bmj.a2315; 2008;337:a2088, doi:10.1136/bmj.a2088; 2008;337:a930, doi:10.1136/bmj.a930; 2008;337:a929, doi:10.1136/bmj.a929; 2008;336:1327, doi:10.1136/bmj.39609.364688.DB; 2008;336:1268, doi:10.1136/bmj.39598.476250.DB; 2008;336:235, doi:10.1136/bmj.39475.397338.DB).

Dr Goodwin, a former director of the US National Institute of Mental Health, is an expert on bipolar disorder and coauthor of *Manic-Depressive Illness*, a psychiatric text, and more than 400 scientific papers.

The Infinite Mind received grants from the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health, among other organisations. Dr Goodwin told the *BMJ* that, as far as he was aware, disclosure was required only for research grants.

Dr Goodwin said that a few years ago "this conflict of interest issue was not really a very prominent issue." Then, he said, Mr Lichtenstein became more concerned about conflicts of interest after stories appeared in the press and after indications from funders, who recommended reducing the 10-15% of funding that the programme received in

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unrestricted educational grants from drug companies.

Mr Lichtenstein, meanwhile, told the *BMJ* that in 2004 he saw an item in *USA Today*, a national newspaper, mentioning that Dr Goodwin was "a consultant to several pharmaceutical companies, including GlaxoSmithKline." After questioning, Dr Goodwin assured the company, Mr Lichtenstein said, that any funds he received from GlaxoSmithKline or other drug companies were for research or for continuing medical education, which Mr Lichtenstein notes is "highly regulated with regard to disclosure and potential conflict."

Mr Lichtenstein also took the step of replacing Dr Goodwin with another host who had no ties to the industry. The new host, Peter Kramer, of Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, replaced Dr Goodwin from April 2004 through to the spring of 2006, although Dr Goodwin continued to appear on the show as a guest.

However, when Mr Lichtenstein learnt that Dr Kramer was not as appealing to audiences as a host as Dr Goodwin, he asked Dr Goodwin whether he was interested in returning. In June 2006, with a view to Dr Goodwin's return as host, Dr Goodwin and Mr Lichtenstein's company signed an agreement that included a long section on conflicts of interest, a copy of which is now posted on the company's website (www.lcmmedia.com) and which includes the following provisions: "To help insure that you are not involved in editorial material that presents a conflict of interest with your work outside of *The Infinite Mind*, you agree to disclose to LCM [the Lichtenstein company] existing and any new business relationships as they occur that could potentially be perceived as representing a conflict of interest with your role as a public radio commentator or journalist."

Mr Lichtenstein insists that although he knew that Dr Goodwin was involved in continuing medical education and research for drug companies, he did not know he was involved in marketing and promotional activities.

Dr Goodwin sought to lay responsibility for the controversy at Mr Lichtenstein's door. "Bill [Lichtenstein] fell down on this last show that created this controversy," he said, "the one on 'Prozac Nation: Revisited.'"

This programme was aired in the week of 26 March 2008. On 9 May 2008 Shannon Brownlee and Jeanne Lenzer published an article in the online magazine *Slate* pointing out that the three guests on the show and Dr Goodwin had undisclosed ties to drug companies (www.slate.com/id/2190775/).

After Senator Grassley's revelations in the *Congressional Record* the story was reported by Ed Silverman, a prize winning journalist at the Newark, New Jersey, newspaper the *Star-Ledger*, in his blog *Pharmalot* (www.pharmalot.com, 20 Nov 2008, "Talk is Not Cheap: NPR Host has ties to Pharma"). He wrote that the "Prozac Nation: Revisited" programme "featured three experts who discussed the controversial link between antidepressants and suicide. And all four, including Goodwin, declared that worries about the drugs have been overblown."

He also wrote: "Goodwin never pointed out that all three guests had ties to pharma . . . The segment, by the way, aired just two months after UK regulators concluded a four-year investigation of GlaxoSmithKline's Paxil [paroxetine] and found that the drugmaker had been aware since 1998 that its pill was associated with a higher risk of suicidal behaviour in adolescents."

Two days later the *New York Times* picked up the story (www.nytimes.com, 22 Nov, 2008, "Radio Host has Pharma Ties") and then criticised Dr Goodwin in an editorial on 30 November (www.nytimes.com, "Expert or Shill?").

Dr Goodwin said that Mr Lichtenstein controlled all guests, content, and scripts of the programmes, while he, as host, only came to the studio an hour or two before the programme to familiarise himself with the script.

Dr Goodwin also insisted that Mr Lichtenstein knew that he received drug company funding. Dr Goodwin told the *BMJ* that besides GlaxoSmithKline he has been paid by Pfizer, Solvay, Janssen, Eli Lilly, AstraZeneca, and Bristol-Myers Squibb. He said he believed that this cancelled out the possible influence of any one company. Furthermore, he said, "I was constantly hectoring the field [telling specialists in the field] to remember lithium," a drug that cannot be patented, to treat bipolar disorder.

However, on 2 December Lichtenstein Creative Media's lawyers sent a letter to Dr Goodwin asking him to "immediately desist from stating or inferring to the news media that Mr Lichtenstein was aware of your financial connections and promptly provide me with written confirmation that you will cease to make such false allegations." The letter is also posted on the company's website.

The *BMJ* asked Mr Lichtenstein whether he thought that bringing back Dr Goodwin as host of the programme in 2006 was a mistake. He replied, "Knowing what we know now, I have to say it was a mistake to have had Fred Goodwin on air any time after his first payment from GlaxoSmithKline, which according to Senator Grassley's records was in 2000." He also noted that standards about disclosure of links between guests and the drug industry were changing rapidly. He said Dr Goodwin had appeared as a guest expert on several NPR shows discussing drug studies and that NPR did not make any reference to the doctor's connections to the drug industry.

The *BMJ* also contacted Tracy Schario, spokeswoman for George Washington University in Washington, DC, where Dr Goodwin is a research professor, and asked whether Dr Goodwin had disclosed to the university his ties to the industry and what the university's policy on disclosure was. She said in an email reply that the university "does not comment on personnel matters."

Dr Goodwin said that the university had not asked him for disclosure of ties to the industry because he was not a paid employee and had no obligation to report such ties.

A spokesman for GlaxoSmithKline told the *BMJ* that healthcare professionals should disclose their ties with the company to their employers or to other interested entities, such as national public radio. A company spokeswoman, Sarah Alspach, said GlaxoSmithKline had cooperated with Senator Grassley in his investigation and intended to give the public information about doctors who were paid by the company for their work in clinical trials or for speaking on behalf of the company.

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