

March 11, 1970

Dr. Philip Handler  
National Academy of Sciences  
2101 Constitution Avenue  
Washington, D.C. 20418

Dear Phil,

Thank you--for your kind remarks about my column dated February 28th. In retrospect I have to dispute your remark about its being "lucid" but I agree the subject is of crucial importance and I will try to deal with it better on future occasions.

Your note reminds me that I have not properly continued our correspondence concerning questions of conflict of interest. I have to admire the candor with which you expose the personal impact of your own concerns about this matter. Obviously you have made a very considerable sacrifice and I deeply respect you for it.

I must still ask, however, whether the council has taken any formal action on this subject. It seems to me of outmost importance that no plausible imputation of self-interest be attached to Academy connected activities and this may have very little to do with the reality of the objectivity and balance of the membership of various committees. As I think more about it I might have to recommend some procedure whereby the potential sources of conflicted interest, on particularly crucial deliberations, be openly stated. I realize this goes even further than the requirements for federal consultants. The people who are most vulnerable are those who are not primarily connected, say, with any industrial effort but who can be made to appear in a very bad light if they hold consultantships or other interests that are not publicly visible at the time a report is published. I do not think very much detail is needed about it but I think a cautionary postscript at the end of important reports might simply indicate that committee member so-and-so has reported "a potential source of conflict of interest having to do with organizations such-and-such" without indicating in any further detail what those relationships are. When the organization in question is vitally effected by the conclusions of the report the consultant might voluntarily wish to spell out his relationship in more detail.

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I realize that this does sound overelaborate but I really do fear for an explosive repercussion on the credibility of scientific judgement if we do not lean over backwards in this matter.

I also included some clippings on the stockmarket response to the cyclamate decision which should have been clarified. It is only common sense that a consultant do nothing in his financial affairs at or about the time of the release of new decisions that could possibly be construed as having taken unfair advantage of privileged information prior to publication. This matter is already very well covered by SCC regulations but I believe that there will be situations where consultants will again have to lean backwards to be very sure that nothing they do during critical periods could possibly be mis-construed on retrospective examination.

At any rate, you had indicated that the matter might have been discussed at the last council meetings and I would be interested in what the outcome was.

By the way of postscript let me say that just like everyone else I have my own entanglements and it is precisely to avoid the embarrassment of having to make any special pleading that I would prefer that there be a regular and well-established procedure for reciting potential conflicts in a routine way. Much hangs on this.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg  
Professor of Genetics

Enclosures  
JL/rr