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Scientists Often Mum About Ties To Industry

By SHERYL GAY STOLBERG

WASHINGTON, April 24 — Scientists who report research findings are expected to divulge any financial ties that might influence their work. But often they do not, according to the first comprehensive analysis of disclosure policies in science and medical journals.

In reviewing 61,134 scholarly articles published in 181 academic journals in 1997, researchers at Tufts University and the University of California at Los Angeles found that just one-half of 1 percent detailed personal financial interests, including consulting arrangements, honorariums, expert witness fees, company equity and stock, and patents. All of those few disclosures appeared in just a third of the 181 journals.

It is possible, of course, that scientists have few conflicts to report. But experts say previous studies have shown that as many as half of all academic researchers consult with industry, and roughly 8 percent have stakes in biomedical companies related to their research.

So the more likely explanation, said Dr. Sheldon Krimsky, a professor of urban and environmental policy at Tufts and the study's lead author, is that journal editors "are not forceful enough" in requiring disclosure, "or there is widespread disobedience" of their rules.

Dr. Krimsky's study appears in the April issue of *Science and Engineering Ethics*, a journal that was not part of his survey.

It comes at a time of increasing concern about the effects of commercialization of science. And the findings are not surprising, said Dr. David Blumenthal, director of the Institute for Health Policy, a research center at Massachusetts General Hospital.

Dr. Blumenthal, who studies the ties between academia and industry, said that scientists who failed to report conflicts generally "believe that they are people of integrity, and they feel they can separate their work from their financial interests."

But research suggests otherwise, Dr. Blumenthal said. Studies have found that scientists with financial ties to the companies whose products they study are more likely to write favorably about those products.

The issue of financial disclosure has been in the news of late; last year, the editors of *The New England Journal of Medicine* apologized to readers for violating their own conflict-of-interest policies by publishing reviews of the medical literature on drug therapies despite the reviewers' financial relationships with the companies marketing the drugs.

Dr. Jeffrey M. Drazen, *The Journal's* editor in chief, said that persuading scientists to divulge personal financial data was not easy. "We have to work at it," he said. When researchers ignore inquiries about conflicts, he said, many journals, including his own, assume none exist.

Dr. Drazen said editors of journals around the world would meet in May and discuss whether researchers should be required to submit either a disclosure of conflict or what he called an "active negative disclosure," — a declaration that the researcher is free of financial conflict.