

## Editorial

# Being or not being an “activist”, that is the question

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### Abstract

Challenging the dominant discourse of physicians is as old as academic medicine. But some health issues seem particularly prone to focus the attention of lay people. This is clearly the case with vaccination where an impressive variety of non-medical contributions have been published. This situation is a godsend for manufacturers and their traditional supporters (governmental agencies, opinion leaders...) as it opens the opportunity for discrediting—under the classical headings of “myth”, “misconception”, “ignorance”, “activism”—any criticism of vaccines quality or vaccination policies, even if it comes from specialists whose skill or expertise is above any suspicion. However, this strategy of “amateurization” (i.e., this strategy by the pharmaceutical industry of undermining the credibility of any criticism as simply reflecting misconceptions of amateurs) regarding vaccine criticism may be easily reversed. In effect, if this is so easy for amateurs to get involved in vaccine controversies, this is because as a whole, the development, assessment and administration of these agents is a shame for the medical world: the weaknesses, contradictions, dissimulations and even lies of most vaccine leaders or governmental “experts” are so gross that they cannot escape the attention even of non medically-trained persons. For health professionals who want to re-direct medicine towards science in the respect of Hippocratic tradition, vaccination appears therefore as a counter-model, a repoussoir (i.e., a perspective attained by the use of illusionary devices) of what happens in practice when academic teaching is driven by financial activism, vested interests, lack of scruples as well as scientific incompetence.

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*Conflicts of Interest:* Marc Girard, M.D., M.Sc., works as an independent consultant for pharmaceutical industry, including vaccine manufacturers and a number of their competitors.

On April 10, 2006, T. Zwillich reported, in Medscape, on a campaign mounted by “activists” who allege influence over vaccine studies. However, being an activist is not needed to observe that something is rotten in the state of vaccine development: As a respected consultant for vaccine manufacturers until recently, I suddenly acquired a reputation of “activist” after being chosen as a medical expert witness by French courts to investigate on the implementation of universal hepatitis B vaccination and its consequences in terms of human suffering.

With drugs such as Vioxx or new antidepressants, evidence of poor research as well as lack of control by the regulatory authorities is obvious enough to have been pointed out even by non health-professionals, such as Congressmen in the U.S. or MPs in the U.K. [1]. Does one need to be an “activist” to remark that, *if this type of concern may arise about the most sophisticated chemical entities of pharmaceutical industry*, the situation is likely to be worse for vaccines, the development of which is “at the zero-level of evidence-based medicine” (EBM) [2], as exemplified by the paucity of toxicological testing, the dramatic brevity of the safety studies, the systematic use of surrogate markers for efficacy, the performance of most clinical studies in developing countries with all the inherent problems regarding quality control, the extrapolation of data, or long-term follow-up (required to assess potential hazards such as multiple sclerosis, lupus, diabetes or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis)?

Does one need to be an “activist” to remind the public that the main agencies in charge of promoting vaccination such as the CDC or the WHO have been repeatedly discredited by dissemination of false epidemiologic data on the burden of infectious diseases [3-5]?

And finally, is this a symptom of “activism” – or of paranoia – to observe that such poorly supported low-cost drug development strategies and the irresponsible dissemination of exaggerated incidences in order to promote vaccinations are likely to account for the impressive boost in the financial benefits to the firms which develop their vaccine sector [6]?

Expert – and not “activist” – analysis of available data shows that the problems concerning vaccines go far beyond than a vague “influence” over clinical or epidemiological investigations. Actually, vaccines development and promotion realize an impressive catalogue of the worst sins against the paradigm of EBM [2, 4]: selective assessment of data, stubborn refusal to weight contradictory studies according to their quality, incomplete or even false referencing, and circular quotation. These are exemplified by the stance of the French health agency about the neurological safety of the hepatitis B vaccine based upon the appalling assertion that nothing (apart hundreds of international cases or investigations!) has been reported outside France, which has then interpreted by the CDC as the failure to find evidence of toxicity in France (the country with the greatest exposure to this vaccine). Worse, both politically driven

assessments being deemed by the WHO as the “consensus” of the main agencies as well as their experts about the neurological safety of hepatitis B vaccine.

And what is one to make of this masterpiece of selective assessment: Of the six case/control studies performed on the risk of MS after hepatitis B vaccination, the WHO [7] discredited that of Hernan *et al.* [8] (the only study devoid of evidence of blatant methodological defects and with above-suspicion financial support) on the motive that it was performed in a country with a targeted policy of immunization and that it had probably included, amongst others, a number of health professionals which “cannot be regarded as a representative sample of the general population.” However, this concern was never raised as an issue in the study by Ascherio *et al.* [9], which, unlike the former, showed no risk increase but was performed... in a cohort of nurses!

Thus, there is no need to be an “activist” to be shocked by such repeated violations of scientific method—or even: of common sense—evidence of the commercial “activism” of vaccine manufacturers over international agencies is perfectly documented by this stunning interview of a salesman of GSK of which I published the first translation some weeks ago [4]:

*“We started increasing the awareness of the European Experts of the World Health Organization about hepatitis B in 1988. From then to 1991, we financed epidemiological studies on the subject to create a scientific consensus about hepatitis being a major public health problem. We were successful because in 1991, WHO published new recommendations about hepatitis B vaccination” [emphasis added].*

The sad reality about anti-vaccine “activists” is that violations of the elementary principles of EBM are so gross that individuals without training in medicine or even in science are able, now, to make valuable contributions showing the contradictions of manufacturers or agencies, thereby refuting the fallacies of these agencies’ hawking of vaccines.

This is impressive confirmation, indeed, of my analysis that, *under the influence of pharmaceutical industry*, “contemporary medicine has lost the way of science” [10]. But, however primitive or unsophisticated they may sometimes be, these contributions from “activists” are infinitely precious as they help to thwart one of the most frightening perversion of scientific knowledge ascribable to pharmaceutical firms, namely their propensity to drown relevant data in a mass of biased or even fraudulent papers, and to exhaust the critics by an unlimited output of such papers.

It is fair to add that this perversion is boosted by the worrying complacency of medical editors and their impudent imbalance when they review manuscripts, especially on vaccines.

Given the published investigations of distressing design [11], studies with suspect results [12], studies with irrelevant referencing [13], or caricatures of science-based reviews based on selective referencing (and often circular) [14,15], there should be no basis to reject even “activist” papers on methodological grounds... Actually (and this remark goes far beyond the scope of vaccines), all the fallacies recently denounced by Marcia Angell in her book, *“The Truth About the Drug Companies: How They Deceive Us and What to Do About It,”* would certainly not have the same impact if they were not repeatedly validated by innumerable publications in the most prestigious medical journals.

In continuously producing flawed evidence, pharmaceutical firms behave like the satyrs of old mythology: they are inexhaustible—except that the formers act in reality and not in fantasy. We, scientists or health professionals, should be grateful to the “activists” who are helping us to defend our virtue.

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