

NEWS

Industry has too much influence in health technology body meetings, scientists say

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London

Leading experts in health technology assessment have warned their global representative body that it risks losing scientific integrity by allowing companies that produce drugs and medical devices too much influence.

Several representatives of Health Technology Assessment International (HTAi) have raised “serious concerns” over its strategic direction in an open letter to its president, Carole Longson. They said that industry views and sponsorship were too prominent at society conferences, which could narrow the focus to “marketable products rather than a broader public health view on health care interventions.” Furthermore, they warned that the organisation’s obligation to protect patients’ interests and act as a neutral forum for “independent researched-based decision support” was being endangered.

Signatories to the letter included David Banta, emeritus professor at the University of Maastricht, who heads the health programme of the US Congressional Office of Technology Assessment.

But the society has defended its neutrality while admitting that the industry’s profile was “higher than in years past” at the society’s June 2014 annual meeting in Washington, DC. Chris Sargent, its chief executive, said the society was “acutely aware” that some members had “strong feelings” about industry participation in its work and funding of its activities. He said the society’s board had still to meet to review the letter and respond formally to the authors. But he told *The BMJ*: “HTAi strives our utmost to ensure institutional practices safeguard the integrity of the society. We underscore the need to continue to be vigilant on this matter.

“For the avoidance of doubt, HTAi does not pursue a policy that allows industry to become the dominant funder for HTAi.”

As a field of scientific research, health technology assessment informs decision making on the use of technologies such as drugs and other treatments, diagnostics, and devices.

HTAi has around 1300 members in over 65 countries, who include research scientists and health policymakers, patients, consumers, providers, and industry representatives.

The open letter to the society’s president was sent by Claudia Wild, director of the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Health Technology Assessment in Austria on behalf of eight “high-level and experienced HTA representatives”—three from Germany and one each from New Zealand, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Spain, and France.

One signatory, Ansgar Gerhardus, a professor at Bremen University’s Department for Health Services Research, told *The BMJ*: “Some of us felt that the HTAi meeting in Washington was overwhelmingly dominated by industry. There were almost twice as many delegates from industry than from universities. This relationship has markedly changed over the years.”

The open letter said that HTAi was increasingly giving industry an “extensive platform” to express its positions, noting the high visibility and participation of commercial companies in events and workshops as keynote speakers and panellists. It said: “HTAi should not become instrumentalised for market access issues (helping to ease the pathways to the market) and selling industry politics; instead HTAi should serve [as a place] for honestly discussing appropriate methods for assessing medical technologies, but also overtreatment, overdiagnosis and waste of limited health resources. HTAi is an instrument to distinguish between true innovations and me-too, unsafe and unnecessary care.”

The authors warned that the society risked becoming less attractive for scientists “who leave the floor to industry representatives” and said they sought open discussions with the board. They proposed to “drastically reduce” input from industry sponsors, allow more room for scientific discussion, apply stricter rules for interest subgroups, and put the society’s policy forum on a separate footing.

Sargent said that the society went to great lengths to ensure balanced sponsorship at annual meetings. He told *The BMJ*: “Unfortunately, HTAi was unable to secure any public funds to assist with the production of the 2014 annual meeting. We think this was largely a product of the location of the meeting and certainly not a reflection of efforts to secure a wide range of funds.”

He continued, “Regardless of where our sponsorship comes from, all HTAi scientific activities, including the development of the programme at the 2014 annual meeting, are not influenced by sponsorship.”

Sargent drew attention to safeguards in the society’s guidelines on annual meetings and said that the society’s policy forum provided a “protected space” for health policymakers to meet and discuss issues of mutual interest with the industry in a way that did “not impinge on the overall suite of activities of HTAi.”

He added: “HTAi is unique in providing a global, neutral forum for debate about how best to use evidence based approaches to facilitate the rational allocation of healthcare and ensure the

sustainability of healthcare systems. We continue to strive to ensure HTAi stays true to its core values while we grow to serve the needs of our diverse, global membership.”

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