

# correspondence

unacceptable conflicts of interests based on the primary interests of the partners, the types of decision that the conflict is likely to affect, and the feasibility of introducing local regulations to protect the freedom and judgement of academic researchers. Step-by-step management of conflicts of interest aims to minimize bias, and, as such, it should be an explicit part of the scientific method.

However, Rylander also attempts to reopen a case that he has now lost both before the academic authorities of the University of Geneva and the Swiss legal system. In response to his letter, we can only refer the interested reader to the published record. As Rylander sued two whistleblowers for libel, the case came before the Swiss judiciary and was appealed all the way to the Swiss Federal Supreme Court (Geneva, 2003). The final sentence of the Geneva Court of Justice of 15 December 2003 completely rejected the charge and confirmed that Rylander “acting in his capacity of associate professor at the University, took advantage of its influence and reputation, not hesitating to put science at the service of money and not heeding the mission entrusted to this public institution, a mission which consists in particular in disseminating a culture founded on scientific knowledge” (Geneva, 2003). Further sources of reference in examining this ‘Affaire Rylander’ include the public *exposé* by McKee of the “very complex set of financial relationships between Professor Rylander and the tobacco industry”, an industry that had “engaged in a covert, sustained campaign to undermine the integrity of science”, together with Rylander’s responses (McKee, 2003, and cited references), further discussions by Diethelm *et al* (2005) and Rylander’s exchanges with these authors (Rylander, 2005). Sources also include the report of the inquiry commission set up in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Geneva (University of Geneva, 2004), which was summarized in the *European Journal of Public Health*, and concluded “that Professor Rylander was guilty of scientific misconduct in hiding

---

## Response by Samia A. Hurst & Alex Mauron

**W**e appreciate Ragnar Rylander’s approval of our conclusions about the management of conflicts of interest. Distinctions can, and should, be made between acceptable and

the real extent of his links with the tobacco industry and in aligning his activity as a scientific investigator and expert with the strategic objectives of his industrial sponsors," (Anon, 2006). The aftermath of the case is outlined in the *Lancet* (Neroth, 2004) and the lessons of the case for conflict-of-interest policies of scientific journals are drawn by the editor of the *International Journal of Cancer* (zur Hausen, 2006).

We can only speculate as to whether the victims of the Spanish Inquisition would agree with Rylander's comparison of his predicament to theirs. As they are not in a position to challenge his rhetoric,

however, this particular point is unlikely ever to be settled in the courtroom.

## REFERENCES

Anon (2006) Editorial note. *Eur J Public Health* **16**: 233

Diethelm PA, Rielle JC, McKee M (2005) The whole truth and nothing but the truth? The research that Philip Morris did not want you to see. *Lancet* **366**: 86–92

Geneva (2003) Arrêt de la Cour de Justice, Chambre Pénale, Audience du Lundi 15 Decembre 2003. Pouvoir Judiciaire, Republic and Canton of Geneva, Switzerland

McKee M (2003) Competing interests: the importance of transparency. *Eur J Public Health* **13**: 193–194

Neroth P (2004) Tobacco ties. *Lancet* **364**: 925–926

Rylander R (2005) Links with the tobacco industry. *Lancet* **365**: 211; author reply 211–212

University of Geneva (2004) Rapport d'enquête dans l'affaire du Pr. Ragnar Rylander. University of Geneva, Switzerland

zur Hausen H (2006) Conflicts of interest: the responsibility of the authors and editors of the *International Journal of Cancer*. *Int J Cancer* **119**: 2919

**Samia A. Hurst & Alex Mauron are at the Institute for Biomedical Ethics, University of Geneva's Medical School, Switzerland.**

**E-mail: samia.hurst@medecine.unige.ch**

doi:10.1038/embor.2008.59