



Conflicts of interest compromise US public health agency's mission, say scientists

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New York

Scientists at the United States' public health agency have urged their employers to "clean up this house," claiming that conflicts of interest are undermining trust in the agency.¹

The scientists at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia, sent an anonymous letter at the end of August to Carmen S Villar, chief of staff at the CDC's Office of the Director. They wrote, "It appears that our mission is being influenced and shaped by outside parties and rogue interests.

"This 'climate of disregard' puts many of us in difficult positions. We are often directed to do things we know are not right."

They claimed that "this unacceptable behavior" was widespread, adding, "These questionable and unethical practices threaten to undermine our credibility and reputation as a trusted leader in public health.

"We would like to see high ethical standards and thoughtful, responsible management restored at CDC. We are asking that you do your part to help clean up this house!"

The letter highlighted links between two CDC veterans—Barbara Bowman and Michael Pratt—and Coca-Cola as some of the problems at the agency.^{2,3}

The letter and emails revealing internal problems at the CDC came to light after US Right to Know, a watchdog organization focusing on food and agricultural issues, filed freedom of information act requests relating to Bowman and Pratt.

Bowman, until recently the director of the agency's Division for Heart Disease and Prevention, joined the CDC in 1992 after working as a senior nutritionist at Coca-Cola. She continued her ties with Coca-Cola while at CDC through the International Life Sciences Institute, an industry front organization whose members include multiple soda companies, including Coca-Cola, and the agricultural giant Monsanto.

Bowman resigned her position at CDC at the end of June, days after these ties became known.⁴

Pratt, a senior adviser for global health in the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention at the CDC, has led research

funded by Coca-Cola and has also worked closely with the International Life Sciences Institute. One of Coca-Cola's strategies to promote Coke has been to claim that exercise, not diet, is linked to obesity and related health problems. Emails show that Pratt discussed this strategy in his role as adviser to Coca-Cola's "Exercise is medicine" initiative. Pratt currently works at the University of California, San Diego as a professor in the Division of Global Health.⁵

The letter also claimed that some resources for domestic work were being channeled into global health issues. "These actions do not serve the public well," it said. "Why is nothing being done to address these problems?"

This is not the first time that conflicts of interest at the CDC have come to light. The agency took industry funding to support pro-industry positions for hepatitis C screening and for the flu drug oseltamivir (Tamiflu). It also oversaw controversial research funded by the sugar industry that purported to exculpate the sugar industry or minimize its role in causing deadly kidney failure among sugar cane workers in Latin America.⁶

The CDC did not respond to inquiries about the letter.

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