

EMAIL EXCHANGE BETWEEN ALAN HAMPSON AND MELISSA SWEET

From: Melissa Sweet [<mailto:melissa@sweetcommunication.com.au>]
Sent: Tuesday, 14 September 2010 5:11 PM
To: Interflu@bigpond.net.au
Subject: Interview request

Dear Alan

I am writing to see if you could spare time for a telephone interview to discuss the role of the ISG, specifically some of the concerns that have been raised, in Australia and internationally, about the commercial ties of influenza experts.

I am keen to chat to you about the general issues, given your role with the ISG. I also would like to talk with you about a specific issue of the PR company Burson Marsteller providing advice to experts associated with the ISG on how to respond to concerns being raised about conflicts of interest.

I am writing a short news story for the BMJ, and may also write some more for the health blog Croakey which, as I gather you've seen, has been following this issue.

If you do not wish to comment, I shall note this in the story. I am approaching all of the experts who received this PR advice.

Thanks very much

Melissa Sweet

On 15/09/10 12:47 PM, "Alan W Hampson" <Interflu@bigpond.net.au> wrote:
Melissa,

You have caught me at a rather bad time – right in the middle of a house move and with limited contact opportunities. Nevertheless I will address the issues that you have raised with this email.

First, while I am aware of the controversy raised in some quarters regarding the global response to the 2009 pandemic, it isn't clear to me what you are planning to write and, therefore not possible for me to make any comment. I am rather mystified, though, by your reference to BM advising our members about responding to conflicts of interest as I am not aware of any such advice. These are issues that our members need to consider themselves and in the case of our Board are registered with ASIC. Regarding this, the ISG takes great care to follow national and international guidelines and the most recent published data and advances in all of its literature and media advice regarding prevention and control of influenza.

I am aware that you contacted a BM representative with questions regarding the BM-ISG relationship and, quite correctly he has advised me of this. The relationship is a client-

contractor agreement, negotiated annually, subject to BM maintaining the ISG's confidentiality (as such relationships are), and also subject to BM providing the ISG with guarantees that they are not conflicted with regard to any relationships with other clients such as pharmaceutical companies.

The ISG's agreement with BM is for it to undertake the following support activities(as we do not currently have the in-house capability to do this):

- Media monitoring.
- Monitor and, if requested, provide the ISG executive with advice on topical issues.
- Fine-tune media and other materials developed by the ISG and distribute these to appropriate media outlets.
- Provide event management support as and when required.

All payments to BM for this work are made directly by the ISG and are governed by our agreement with them and an annual budget set by our Board, monitored by a finance committee which includes an external accountant.

As noted on our web site and on all relevant materials that we distribute, we do solicit funds from pharmaceutical companies and these are spent conducting programs designed and controlled by the ISG. The relationship between sponsors and the ISG rests firmly between the ISG's executive (via its executive officer) and those sponsors, not through BM. All of our members, including myself, provide their services pro-bono, however, we do employ an executive officer.

If you do have any specific questions or would like to share with me any specific information (emails etc) that you believe differ from the above I would be pleased to look at them. As I explained above there may be a delay in my response due to the house move currently in progress, access to services, email etc.

Dr. Alan W. Hampson, MSc., Hon M.D. (Melb), FASM, OAM
Chairman, Influenza Specialist Group

From: Melissa Sweet [<mailto:melissa@sweetcommunication.com.au>]
Sent: Wednesday, 15 September 2010 10:21 PM
To: Alan W Hampson
Subject: Re: Interview request
Importance: High

Thanks Alan

I appreciate your response and the detail provided.

I have seen an email where BM provides advice to experts associated with the ISG about how to respond if there are media queries around the ISG's industry funding arrangements.

This is the focus of the story.

If you wish to add to your comments, please let me know asap.

Thanks
Melissa

On 16/09/10 9:34 AM, "Alan W Hampson" <Interflu@bigpond.net.au> wrote:
Melissa, thank you for clarifying your focus and your reference to the email concerned – It is not one that I specifically recall and, therefore, possibly sent some time ago. All such messages to our members were formulated by the ISG sometimes with input from BM and were sent on behalf of the ISG, I doubt that any historical emails say anything different than the information that I have provided to you.

We do need to remind our members occasionally regarding the basis of our funding and how we administer it, particularly as members join. Your enquiry reinforces this need but also points out that we should clarify to our members that advice sent on our behalf by BM or any other contractor is just that and not independent advice from them.

Quite possibly the email in question was sent before we employed our Executive Officer or while he was settling into his role at a time when, for convenience, I asked BM to undertake such tasks. Today our EO Kim Sampson is responsible for such issues.

Dr. Alan W. Hampson, MSc., Hon M.D. (Melb), FASM, OAM
Chairman, Influenza Specialist Group

From: Melissa Sweet [<mailto:melissa@sweetcommunication.com.au>]
Sent: Thursday, 16 September 2010 10:49 PM
To: Alan W Hampson
Subject: Re: Interview request

Dear Alan

I'm sorry but your response doesn't gel with the information I have before me which shows that on Aug 31 Kim Sampson forwarded an email from Gareth Finch at Burson Marsteller to a number of experts associated with the ISG.

Later in the day you responded to the email and thanked David Smith for his feedback to the advice from BM about how to respond if media concerns were raised around COI issues.

Perhaps you have forgotten this; if you would like to clarify or add anything, please do so.

Thanks
Melissa

On 19/09/10 8:29 PM, "Alan W Hampson" <Interflu@bigpond.net.au> wrote:

Melissa,

I apologise for the delay in responding - please do not interpret this as either an unwillingness or inability to adequately respond to your questions. On the contrary it was the consequence of an untimely retinal tear requiring treatment by laser surgery. I can now see sufficiently to check and respond to important emails. Do note, however, that in the next few days I am relocating and dependent on the good graces of Telstra to get me reconnected to my email.

Regarding the issue that you raise: - The emails which somebody has apparently forwarded to you for reasons that escape me, are of course just a small snapshot of a series of exchanges between ISG and BM that took place.

You will recall that I explained BM's role as:

To undertake the following support activities:

- Media monitoring.

- Monitor and, if requested, provide the ISG executive with advice on topical issues.

- Fine-tune media and other materials developed by the ISG and distribute these to appropriate media outlets.

- Provide event management support as and when required.

The issue that you referred to is one that was identified by BM in the course of its media and topical issues monitoring. We regularly teleconference with BM when such issues arise. We (Kim Sampson and I) did so in this case and agreed that it would be timely to remind our key spokespeople regarding the factual details of the sponsorship that we receive, and how it is managed, just in case the issue was raised in media interviews/enquiries. The advice was drafted by Gareth at BM according to our instructions following this discussion. It was subsequently approved by myself and Kim and then forwarded by Kim to the same group of ISG members who receive copies of other ISG documents such as press releases. Thus it was an ISG position statement with full ISG approval. As BM are frequently the first point of contact for media enquiries on our behalf we are happy for them to receive feed-back from our members with respect to media issues and to provide advice within the guidelines that have been agreed by the ISG. Issues that fall outside the guidelines are quite properly referred back to the ISG – in other words BM act as an interface on our behalf, working to our guidelines and not as an independent entity. This is exactly as one would expect in any contractor client relationship. Therefore, the case that you cite is totally consistent with all that I have told you although you are apparently unable to see this.

Our membership includes a wide group of experts often with differing views on issues (clearly as evidenced in the current situation) and they are all at liberty to provide feed-back to the group as a whole. This can lead to interesting 'discussions' which our executive certainly takes on board. We received only one response to the above advice, as you noted David Smith responded with the very clear message "It is important to be transparent about this, as we have done." - which I consider a responsible and truthful observation. If somebody had reason to debate this issue or to express contrary views, (although I'm not sure on what

grounds they might), I think that it is disappointing that they didn't take the opportunity to do so openly with their peers rather than surreptitiously forwarding our emails to a third party.

I stand by the ISG's independence in editorial policy, its ethics and the fact that BM are simply a contractor operating under our instructions.

You may either have been unaware, or do not recall, that the ISG grew out of a public health crisis in Australia in 1989 – an influenza vaccine shortage created by somewhat irresponsible media reports of an impending epidemic at a time when few of the recommended 'at-risk' individuals were receiving regular vaccination regardless of the NH&MRC guidelines. I have been associated, since that time, with efforts to ensure that this did not happen again. I am proud of what has been achieved by the ISG, which was the principal contributor to achieving over 70% vaccination cover in the older adult group even before the Australian Government came on board with free vaccine for that group in 1999.

I am aware that you have levelled criticism at me personally based on the fact that you did not appear to understand that from 1992, in my role with the WHO Collaborating Centre for Reference and Research on Influenza, my responsibility was to WHO and to the Australian Government in a laboratory historically hosted by CSL. This was formalised in an Agreement, made in the national/international interest, between the Commonwealth and CSL upon privatisation of the latter in 1995. You are probably also unaware that from that time I lobbied the Commonwealth to relocate and upgrade funding of the WHO Collaborating Centre to avoid perceived conflict of interest (which I ensured never became actual) and am pleased that this was achieved with relocation to its current host at VIDRL, regrettably after I had made the decision to retire.

I am totally comfortable that my efforts, and those of the ISG, are conducted in the public health interest and not compromised by commercial interests. Frankly it is of little consequence to me personally whether you are prepared to believe this. It does offend me, however, that you wish to imply that the efforts of this excellent and dedicated organisation, and its associated public health practitioners, are prejudiced by commercial interests.

Dr. Alan W. Hampson, MSc., Hon M.D. (Melb), FASM, OAM
Chairman, Influenza Specialist Group

Dear Alan

Thanks for your response.

Just to correct the record: a number of people forwarded the email to me.

I don't think it is helpful to view the raising of these issues as a personal attack on yourself or the ISG, as you seem to be suggesting is the case.

As you may be aware, there have been widespread concerns internationally about the role of industry funding in influencing education, research and policy, as evidenced by the recent IOM report, *Conflict of Interest in Medical Research, Education, and Practice* <<http://www.iom.edu/Activities/Workforce/ConflictOfInterest.aspx>>, and there are a number of initiatives around the world seeking to address such issues.

However, specific conflict of interest concerns related to influenza policy have been raised, as I'm sure you've seen, not only in Australia but internationally.

There seems to be a growing sense that these concerns merit a serious, considered response by all involved parties. I'm not sure that a PR agency is the proper source of advice on these issues.

Cheers

Melissa