

Responses from some of the recipients of the Burson-Marsteller email

Professor Anne Kelso, Director of the WHO Collaborating Centre for Reference and Research on Influenza in Melbourne, said the Centre was an affiliate of the ISG and she received their media monitoring service and attended their annual conference. The PR advice was uninvited, she said. “My email is full of emails that I don’t ask to receive.” She said it was important that issues around conflicts of interest were aired in public.

Ms Prue Power, Executive Director of the Australian Healthcare & Hospitals Association, said: “For the record, AHHA had no awareness of the link to the PR company and did not receive direct advice or engage in any discussion in relation to this. Our involvement with the ISG has simply been to promote flu vaccination amongst healthcare workers which is a significant issue in public hospitals, and the only way in which we have done this is through providing them an opportunity to supply an article for The Health Advocate.”

Professor David Smith, a member of the ISG board, and a Director of the National Influenza Centre at PathWest in Perth, and a member of state and federal health advisory committees, replied to the PR advice by email, noting the “the importance of working with industry to promote these valuable health messages”. When asked about the email, he said: “From my personal perspective in relation to ISG, all the statements I make are independent professional opinions based on my knowledge and experience related to influenza. Furthermore, to the best of my knowledge, any statements put out by ISG that that have been attributed to me have been checked, revised and approved by me. As such they are also my independent professional opinion. I do not receive any payment for my services.”

Dr Peter Eizenberg: I agree with the comments made by Simon Chapman about this issue in Croakey blog (posted June 8, 2010). I also agree strongly with his proposal (in his last paragraph) towards resolving this complex issue:

One resolution to this would be if institutions like universities could adopt a system whereby industries wishing to avail themselves of independent expertise could contribute to a central funding pool, administered and governed entirely by the universities and research institutes, with no governance role from industry. Requests for engagement could be made via the funding pool administration, and all

payment and reimbursement likewise handled All payments and expenses would be via the pool, not directly through a company or industry body. Such an arrangement would seem likely to reduce the extent to which researchers might be tempted into the sorts of lacks of judgment that can arise from being too close to a company or industry, while at the same time acknowledging the importance of industry engagement.

My understanding is that the ISG operates on a model similar to that described above by Simon Chapman.