Reed Elsevier’s arms trade

Scientific communities must work together to prevent the sale of arms

In a recent editorial in the Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine, Richard Smith drew attention once again to the paradoxical and disturbing association between Reed Elsevier, a huge global publishing company, and the international arms trade. While promoting world health through its publications, including the Lancet, Reed Elsevier also organises international trade fairs for the arms industry. By facilitating the sale of armaments, Reed Elsevier is directly implicated in causing untold damage to health. This hypocrisy is well illustrated by Smith’s "absurd" example of an imaginary tobacco company that publishes health journals to increase tobacco sales. Sadly, his example is neither absurd nor imaginary. In 2005, an article in the Lancet reported undisclosed relations between the tobacco industry and the health related journal Indoor and Built Environment.

Reed Elsevier’s purpose in publishing the Lancet and other related health journals is not to covertly support arms trade revenues. Reed Elsevier, like any other company, aims to make money through business activities that have diversified over time. But its activities in organising exhibitions for the arms trade are only a small part (we believe about 1%) of its turnover. Why would Reed Elsevier risk alienating the essential part of its money making business “the health, science and education sector” to allow a continued association with a much smaller asset, the arms trade?

For alienation is what’s happening. In the short term, the publicity surrounding this controversy may be good for Reed Elsevier, if all publicity really is good publicity. In the long term, however, the consequences of the debate could be disastrous for the company’s reputation and profits, and, if journals do more good than harm, for world health.

In September 2005, when the Lancet first highlighted Reed Elsevier’s links with the arms trade, there was an appropriate outcry from the journal’s international advisory board and global opinion leaders. More recently, condemnation of Reed Elsevier has come in a letter to the Times signed by 140 prominent academics, in rapid responses to a BMJ news article, and via an online petition that has collected approaching 1000 signatures (http://idioloe.org.uk/elsevier/petition.php).

This continued and growing negative publicity could have several possible effects. The inevitable damage to Reed Elsevier’s global corporate reputation will probably lead to lost business opportunities and thus reduced profits. Damage to the reputation of Reed Elsevier publications, such as the Lancet, may lead to fewer high profile submissions, for which journals fiercely compete, and so a reduction in essential revenue derived from the sale of reprints. Furthermore, damage to the reputations of health journals including the Lancet could have a negative impact on global health, which these journals strive so hard to improve.

It has not been a straightforward decision to speak out directly on this issue. The BMJ is often seen as being in competition with the Lancet and might be seen to be cashing in on the Lancet’s discomfort. But the BMJ has no wish to see the Lancet diminished. The two publications are in many ways complementary, and together they represent important evidence of the continuing influence of British publishing and science around the world. Collaborations between the BMJ and the Lancet have repeatedly helped raise awareness of important issues in health care and research, and more are planned. Anyone interested in global health should want the Lancet to continue to thrive unhampered by such disastrous bedfellows. As Smith says in his recent rapid response to a BMJ news article on this subject, “Are people not bothered or are they scared to speak up? Or perhaps people think that it would be disloyal to the journals, which include the Lancet. If people are wary of being disloyal I urge you not to be. You do nothing but good for the Lancet and the other journals by speaking up”. So the BMJ joins the Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine in calling for action against Reed Elsevier.

The scientific and health communities with which Reed Elsevier is linked in a symbiotic relationship have a clear opportunity to exert their influence. As a group, these communities have the power to influence corporate strategy. They must sign petitions such as the one identified here, the societies for which Reed Elsevier publishes journals must look for alternative publishers, and editors of journals must express their disgust at the company’s arms trade activities through collectives such as the World Association of Medical Editors (http://www.wame.org/). Furthermore, academic and industry funded researchers should now agree not to submit their high profile randomised control trials to Reed Elsevier journals until links with the arms trade are ended. They should make these decisions public, thus ending their tacit support for the company’s links with the arms trade. Direct loss of revenue in this way would quickly identify to Reed Elsevier that the scientific world will no longer tolerate its warmongering and health damaging business activities.

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References

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