

Project On Government Oversight

Exposing Corruption Exploring Solutions www.POGO.org

July 11, 2011

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Via Facsimile: (202) 456-2461

Dear Mr. President:

The Project On Government Oversight (POGO) is a nonpartisan independent watchdog that champions good government reforms. POGO's investigations into corruption, misconduct, and conflicts of interest achieve a more effective, accountable, open, and ethical federal government.

We write to you regarding the Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues which advises you on bioethics and works to promote ethical behavior in research, healthcare, and technological innovation. On November 24, 2009, you named Dr. Amy Gutmann, President of the University of Pennsylvania, to be the Commission Chair.

We have concerns about Dr. Gutmann's commitment to addressing important bioethical problems. Last November, we sent a letter to Dr. Francis Collins at the National Institutes of Health about four cases where federally funded researchers used a ghostwriting company paid by GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) to write manuscripts that were favorable to Paxil, an antidepressant sold by GSK.¹ According to documents we included with the letter, GSK paid a ghostwriter to write an editorial for a medical journal with the byline of Dr. Dwight Evans, Chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. Despite this damaging information, the University of Pennsylvania did not take any action, or even appear to give the evidence credence. A University spokesman was quoted in the University's student newspaper, stating:

¹ Project On Government Oversight, POGO Letter to Francis S. Collins, Director, National Institutes of Health, regarding NIH on Ghostwriting Academics, November 29, 2010. <http://www.pogo.org/pogo-files/letters/public-health/ph-iis-20101129.html>

While we support any effort to promote scientific integrity, we believe that the allegations of ghostwriting made by POGO regarding a short editorial authored in 2003 by Drs. Evans and Charney are unfounded.²

We now learn that a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania has filed a charge of research misconduct against Dr. Evans that includes allegations once again of potential ghostwriting that favors GSK and Paxil. We do not understand how Dr. Gutmann can be a credible Chair of the Commission when she seems to ignore bioethical problems on her own campus. Until the University concludes a sincere and transparent investigation of these charges and takes decisive action to deter future ghostwriting, we feel that Dr. Gutmann should be removed as Chair of the Commission.

The terrible effects of ghostwriting on research and healthcare are well understood. When Dr. Collins was asked a year ago on C-SPAN about his thoughts on ghostwriting, he said:

I was shocked by that revelation—that people would allow their names to be used on articles they did not write, that were written for them, particularly by companies that have something to gain by the way the data is presented....If we want to have the integrity of science preserved, that's not the way to do it.³

We agree completely with Dr. Collins and feel it is time that the government move beyond being shocked by ghostwriting and act to prohibit federal funding for researchers who engage in ghostwriting. Last year, Senator Charles Grassley released a report on ghostwriting in medical literature. He concluded:

Ghostwritten articles can have a significant impact on, among other things, physician prescribing practices. When prominent physicians and scientists lend their names to an article, it raises the credibility of the findings and conclusions presented. This, in turn, can affect the pocketbook of the American taxpayer since Medicare and Medicaid pay billions of dollars for prescription drugs. In addition, manipulation of medical literature could lead physicians to prescribe drugs that are more costly or may even harm patients.⁴

And just last month, the University of Toronto Faculty of Law and the Joint Centre for Bioethics hosted the first international conference on the corrosive effects of corporate-funded ghostwriting on medicine. Trudo Lemmens, the University of Toronto law professor who hosted the conference, says biomedical ghostwriting is a public health issue in need of serious attention because it can lead to the wrong use of pharmaceuticals, a leading cause of hospitalizations in both the United States and Canada.⁵

² Ellie Levitt, "Psychiatry chairman faces ghostwriting accusations," *The Daily Pennsylvanian*, December 2, 2010. <http://www.dailypennsylvanian.com/article/psychiatry-chairman-faces-ghostwriting-accusations> (Downloaded July 5, 2011)

³ "Newsmakers with Dr. Francis Collins," C-SPAN, December 21, 2009. <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/290855-1> (Downloaded November 19, 2010)

⁴ Senate Finance Committee, 111th Congress, Minority Staff Report: *Ghostwriting in Medical Literature*, June 24, 2010. <http://www.law-lib.utoronto.ca/ghostwriter/Senator-Grassley-Report.pdf> (Downloaded July 5, 2011) (hereinafter *Ghostwriting in Medical Literature*)

⁵ *Ghostwriting in Medical Literature*

Thank you for your consideration of the matter. Please contact Paul Thacker of my staff at (202) 347-1122 with any questions or if you need any additional information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Danielle Brian". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name and title.

Danielle Brian
Executive Director

cc: Members of the Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues