

IS THE American Heart Association FOR SALE?

AHA leadership's financial ties to the pharmaceutical & food industries

“We are in the business of saving lives... We are not in the business of fundraising. The trust of the public is the most critical thing we have.”

—Rose Marie Robertson, Chief Science & Medical Officer, American Heart Association¹

For generations, Americans have relied on the American Heart Association's careful analysis and recommendations for how to live long, healthy lives. Given the AHA's influence over public health, and the premium it places on public trust, we believe the organization should do everything it can to avoid financial ties to corporations with commercial interests in cardiovascular health, and especially to those whose products may pose risks to cardiovascular health.

However, the AHA and its leadership accept large sums of money from individuals and industries, including pharmaceuticals and food service, which have a direct interest in public health policy.

The AHA reported that it received over \$15 million from pharmaceutical, medical device, and health insurance companies in the 2013-14 fiscal year.² Several pharmaceutical companies contributed more than \$1 million to the AHA in that fiscal year, including Covidien (\$1,150,000), Daiichi Sankyo (\$1,527,500), and Pfizer (\$3,280,875). Many more pharmaceutical, medical-device,

health-insurance and food-manufacturing companies have each contributed \$1 million or more to the AHA since the charity's founding.³

Members of the AHA's Research Committee have received significant income from pharmaceutical and medical technology firms. From 2013 through 2014, Zoll Lifecor Corporation

paid a member of the AHA's 2014-15 Research Committee⁴, Dr. Mark Hlatky, \$20,000.⁵ Another member of that year's Research Committee, Dr. Richard H. Karas, received over \$57,000 in research funding from Merck Sharp & Dohme Corporation.⁶

The current Research Committee's Chair, Joseph Broderick, received over \$20,000 in industry payments from 2013 through 2014.⁷ Research Committee member Franke Sellke received more than \$15,000 in payments in 2014 alone.⁸ Another member, Ken Fujise, received more than \$90,000 in industry research funding, and more than \$22,000 in industry payments in that year.⁹ Finally, in 2013 and 2014 combined, current Research Committee member Adrian Hernandez received \$57,000 in general payments and over \$2.8 million in research funding.¹⁰

Dr. Robert Eckel, a former president of the AHA¹¹ and Co-Chair of the 2013 ACC/AHA Lifestyle Guideline Work Group,¹² received nearly \$33,000 in industry payments in 2014, the majority of it coming as consulting fees from pharmaceutical companies.¹³ Over \$14,000

came from Sanofi-Aventis U.S., a subsidiary¹⁴ of the French pharmaceutical company Sanofi. On July 24, 2015, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) granted approval for Sanofi-Aventis's Praluent, an injectable cholesterol-lowering "PCSK9-inhibitor" drug.¹⁵ Eckel had testified before the FDA on behalf of the drug,¹⁶ whose annual price per patient was listed at about \$14,600 per year.¹⁷ Express Scripts' Chief Medical Officer Dr. Steve Miller wrote, "the total annual cost burden of [PCSK9-inhibitor] therapy for U.S. payers and patients could eventually grow to more than \$100 billion each year, if not managed properly."¹⁸

Eckel was co-author of the 2013 ACC/AHA Guideline on the Treatment of Blood Cholesterol to Reduce Atherosclerotic Cardiovascular Risk in Adults,¹⁹ which the AHA characterized as containing "basically recommendations for health-care providers across the nation, created through years of scientific research."²⁰ Upon publishing the cholesterol guideline, the AHA stated that more Americans could benefit from cholesterol-lowering statin drugs, writing that the drugs "could be prescribed to an estimated 33 million

On June 25, 2015, **DR. MARK CREAGER** was named president of the American Heart Association for its 2015-16 fiscal year.ⁱ In 2013 and 2014 combined, Dr. Creager received over \$30,000 from Novartis and AstraZeneca, two of the highest-revenue pharmaceutical companies in the world.ⁱⁱ \$16,500 was for consulting, with the remaining payments for travel, lodging, food and beverage expenses.ⁱⁱⁱ

DR. NATALIA S. ROST, Board President of the AHA Greater Boston affiliate,^{iv} received over \$15,000 in industry payments in 2014 alone, the majority of it associated with Japanese pharmaceutical company Daiichi Sankyo's anti-coagulant Edoxaban.^v

AHA announced on August 3 that cardiologist **JOSEPH A. HILL** will assume

Americans without cardiovascular disease who have a 7.5 percent or higher risk for a heart attack or stroke within the next 10 years.”²¹ The AHA described this as a “dramatic change from the 2002 federal cholesterol guideline.” As reported in an appendix to the AHA’s 2013 Guideline, Eckel indicated that from 2008-2012 he had worked as a consultant for statin manufacturers Pfizer (Lipitor) and Merck (Zocor), among several other pharmaceutical companies.²²

In 2013, Eckel was the Co-Chair of the AHA/ACC Lifestyle Expert Work Group, whose intent was to “evaluate evidence that particular dietary patterns, nutrient intake, and levels and types of physical activity can play a major role in CVD prevention and treatment through effects on modifiable CVD risk factors (i.e., blood pressure [BP] and lipids).”²³ That same year, Eckel indicated that he had worked as a consultant for Foodminds—a consulting and communications firm that claims to “Partner with Food Leaders” including the American Frozen Food Institute, the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association, and Nestlé²⁴—in 2013 and between 2008 and 2012.²⁵

The AHA has also received significant contributions from a partner of the majority owner of Au Bon Pain, a fast-casual food chain. Craig Rydin, an Au Bon Pain director and a partner of private-equity firm LNK Partners, gave AHA between \$100,000 and \$249,999 in the 2013-14 fiscal year. The AHA’s 2013-2014 annual report shows only three individual donors who contributed in ranges higher than the \$100,000-\$249,999 range that fiscal year.²⁶

This may be cause for concern in light of a recent UNITE HERE analysis of Au Bon Pain’s nutrition menu, which found that the whole lunch/dinner sandwiches and wraps on Au Bon Pain’s June 23, 2015, nutrition menu contain, on average, more sodium, saturated fat, and calories than the average sandwiches, wraps and burgers on either the McDonald’s June 26, 2015, nutrition menu or Burger King’s July 2015 nutrition menu. (The full report, including fully cited sources and methodology, is available at NOBONPAIN.INFO.)

Mr. Rydin is on the American Heart Association Board of Directors, according to the website of

the position of editor-in-chief of *Circulation*, a Journal of the American Heart Association, on July 1, 2016.^{vi} In 2014, Hill received over \$20,000 in industry payments, with biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies Gilead, Covis, Merck, and Amgen at the top of the list.^{vii}

led efforts to set standards for stroke treatment centers, including as a lead author of papers published by the AHA’s journal *Stroke*.^{xi} He took in more than \$185,000 from health care manufacturing companies in 2013 and 2014 combined.^x

DR. MARK ALBERTS, a Fellow of the American Heart Association,^{viii} has

his private equity firm (LNK Partners),²⁷ and Au Bon Pain's Chief Brand Officer, Maria Feicht, is a member of the AHA's Greater Boston Board of Directors.²⁸

Dr. Barbara H. Roberts, Clinical Associate Professor of Medicine at Brown University's Alpert Medical School,²⁹ reported in May 2014

that AHA's Heart Check program, which gives the AHA's stamp of approval to certain foods, is supported by food-company payments of between \$1,000 and \$7,500, plus annual renewal fees.³⁰ We were unable to determine, based on public AHA documents, how much revenue is generated through the Heart Check program.

Recommendations

As the AHA's Chief Science and Medical Officer recently stated, public trust is of critical importance to the charitable organization. However, when the organization and its leadership receive substantial payments from pharmaceutical and food corporations, the line between charity and business agendas can become blurred. The American Heart Association should take the following steps to shore up the public trust that is so essential to its success:

- Implement a two-year cooling-off period following a medical professional's receipt of more than \$1,000 from any company in the food-service, food-manufacturing, pharmaceutical, or health insurance industries before allowing that professional to serve in a director, committee-member, or other leadership position at AHA.
- Prohibit sitting directors, committee members, or other AHA leaders from accepting payments from any companies in the food-service, food-manufacturing, pharmaceutical, or health-insurance industries.
- Preclude director and other leadership positions from being held by representatives of any company in the food-service, food-manufacturing, pharmaceutical, or health-insurance industries.
- Publicly declare, on an annual basis, the precise contributions made by individuals or corporations in the food-service, food-manufacturing, pharmaceutical, or health-insurance industries.



Endnotes

1. Quoted in "Doctor with financial ties to drug-makers at center of sales boom of new anticoagulants," John Fauber and Coulter Jones, Milwaukee *Journal Sentinel*, August 1, 2015.
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