

What are we talking about when  
we talk about **conflict of interests**

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Medical marketing influences behaviors and choices that can have important health consequences and also may adversely influence efforts to control unsustainable health care spending.

The marketing of medicine involves a complex interaction involving industry, organizations, and individuals involved in health care.

Pharmaceutical companies paid physicians and teaching hospitals for disease awareness education, including speaker fees at company events, honoraria, and education not always related to specific products.

Medical centers promote institutional prestige, tests, and interventions (many unproven) using emotional appeals rather than data.

*CLAUDIO AND STEFANO WORK IN A GROUP MEDICINE AMBULATORY. CLAUDIO WAS INVITED TO A CONGRESS BY SUPERPHARMA. STEFANO HAS ALSO RECEIVED AN INVITATION, BUT FROM ULTRAFARM. FOR DIFFERENT REASONS THEY ARE TENTED TO ACCEPT, EVEN THOUGH THEY KNOW THAT ACCEPTING THESE INVITATIONS MAY INFLUENCE PRESCRIPTIONS (1) AND ENCOURAGE 'INDUSTRIAL MEDICINE' (2).*



1. Fugh-Berman A. Industry-funded medical education is always promotion. *BMJ* 2021;373.
2. Ranganathan S, Prasad V. CME: Is it Meeting the Mark? *Am J Med* 2023; Mar 8.

THE USE OF PRIVATE CME PROVIDERS IS PREVALENT: IN THE LAST THREE YEARS, THE PERCENTAGE OF SPONSORED EVENTS WAS OVER 50%. 93% OF SCIENTIFIC SOCIETIES SEEK FUNDING FOR CONGRESSES IN EXCHANGE FOR SPONSORED SESSIONS (3). MORE TRANSPARENCY TRANSLATES INTO MORE EXPLICIT SPONSORING (4).



SILVIA IS A REP OF A PHARMA COMPANY AND TAKES CARE OF RELATIONS WITH THE GPs. SHE IS HAPPY WITH HER WORK BECAUSE THE DOCTORS PERCEIVE THE RELATIONSHIP AS SUPPORT FOR DRUG EDUCATION.







IF I DO NOT TAKE  
ADVANTAGE OF THIS  
OPPORTUNITY, HOW CAN  
I ACCRUE CME CREDITS  
BY THE END OF THE  
YEAR?



3. Simulescu L, et al. CME in time of crisis. J Eur CME 2022;11(1):2035950.  
4. Kearney P, et al. The medical profession, industry, and continuing medical education: Am J Med. 2019;132(8):921-5.



YOU WILL END UP  
PRESCRIBING ONLY  
ULTRAFARM  
PRODUCTS...

I CERTAINLY DON'T  
GET INFLUENCED  
BY AN INVITATION  
TO A  
CONFERENCE...

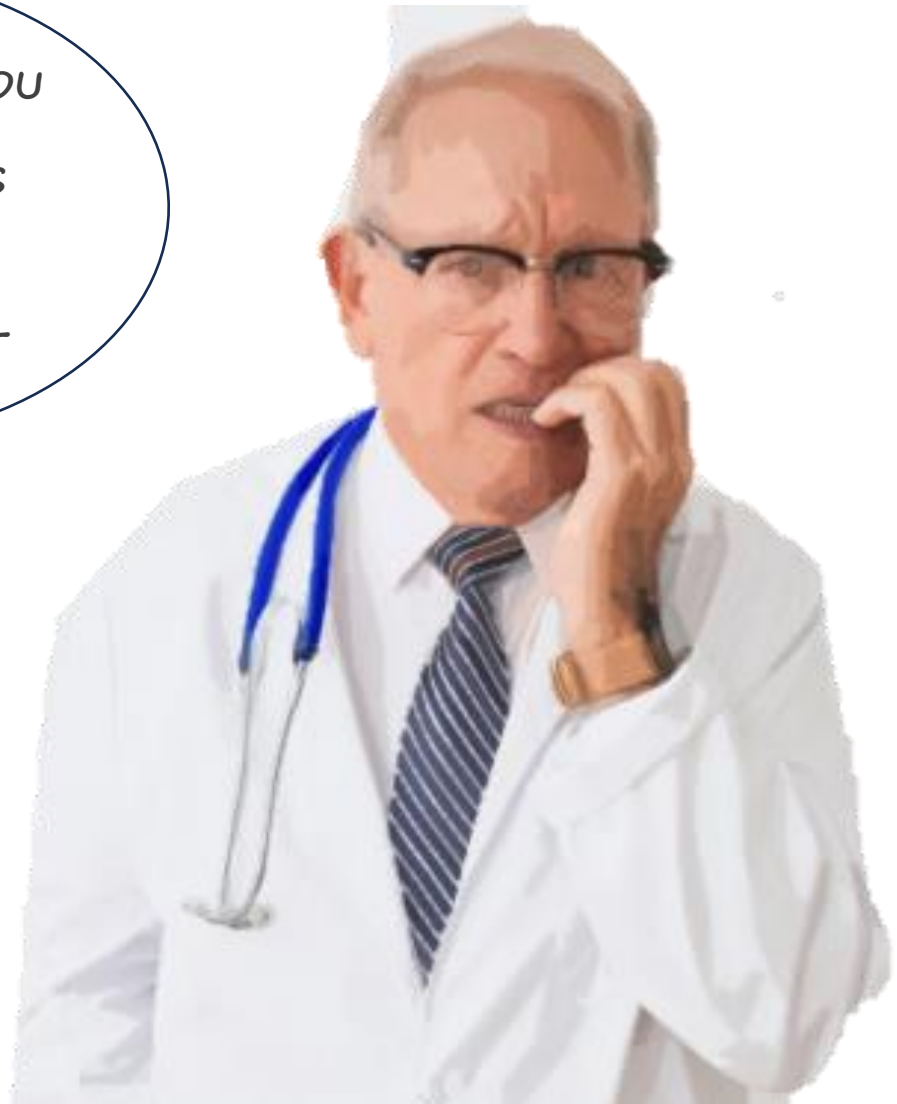
IN A COFFEE BREAK STEFANO TELLS  
ABOUT THE INVITATION TO SARA, A  
YOUNGER COLLEAGUE....

SIX OUT OF 10 DOCTORS SAY  
THEY CANNOT BE  
INFLUENCED. BUT EIGHT OUT  
OF 10 ARE CONVINCED THAT  
COLLEAGUES ARE. WHEN A  
DOCTOR RECEIVES A GIFT OF  
EVEN \$10, HE CHANGES HIS  
ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE  
PRODUCTS OF THE COMPANY  
FROM WHICH THE GIFT  
COMES (5, 6).

5. Lieb K, Scheurich A. PloS one  
2014;9(10):e110130.  
6. Lo B, Grady D. JAMA  
2017;317(17):1719-20.



BY THE WAY: DO YOU  
KNOW THAT WE  
WOMEN DOCTORS  
ARE LESS  
VULNERABLE TO  
PHARMACEUTICAL  
PROMOTION?



COMPARED TO THEIR MALE COLLEAGUES, FEMALE DOCTORS RECEIVE SIGNIFICANTLY LESS COMPENSATION FROM THE PHARMACEUTICAL AND DEVICE INDUSTRIES FOR THE SAME ACTIVITIES (8).

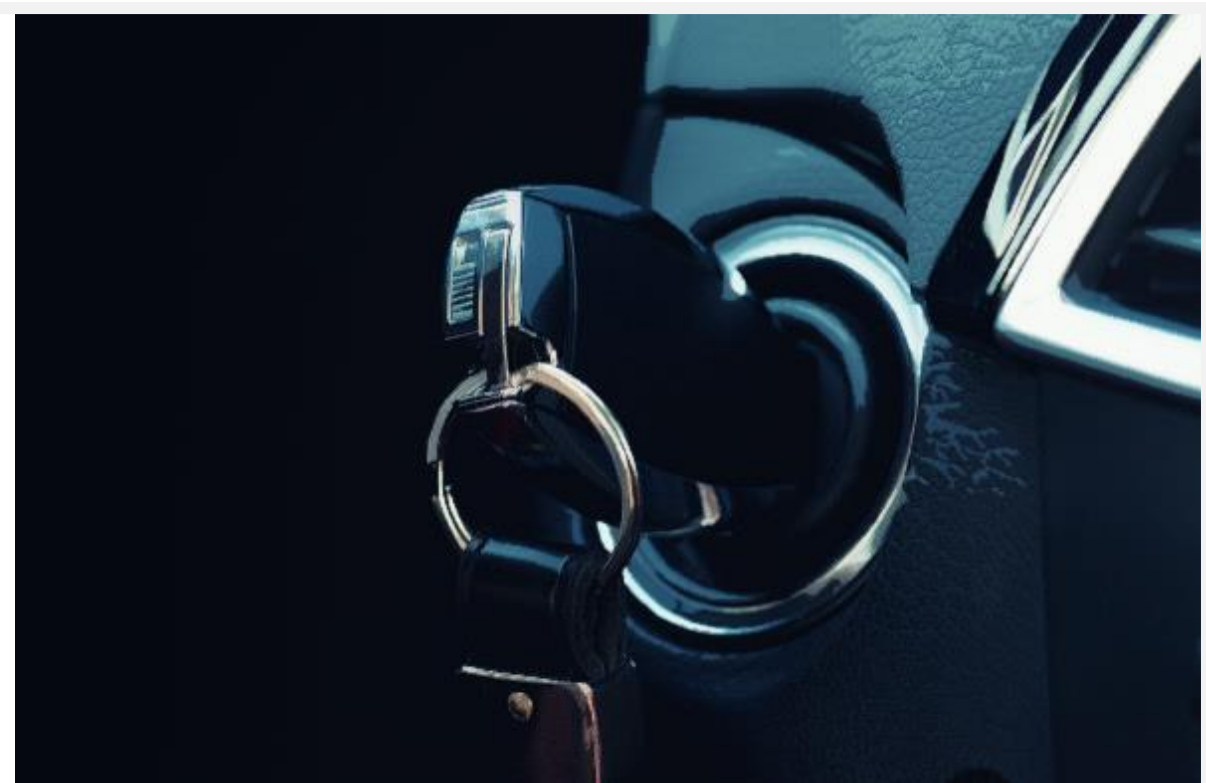




LEAVING THE  
STUDIO, SARA  
KEEPS THINKING  
ABOUT THE  
CONVERSATION  
WITH STEFANO...



DOCTORS INVITED TO PLEASANT PLACES PRESCRIBE THE  
SPONSOR'S DRUGS TWICE AS OFTEN AS THEIR COLLEAGUES (9).



LUNCHES AT SPONSORED MEETINGS ARE 40 PER CENT MORE EXPENSIVE THAN THE AVERAGE ZAGAT GUIDE (10).



9. Orlowski JP. Chest 1992;102(1):270-3.

10. Grande D, Volpp K. JAMA 2003;290(9):1150-1.



IT IS NOT AN EASY DECISION FOR CLAUDIO AND STEFANO.  
THEY TAKE A FEW DAYS TO DECIDE...



HERE IS THE DECISION. TO AVOID CONFLICTS OF INTEREST. CLAUDIO WILL GO WITH SUPERPHARMA AND STEFANO WITH ULTRAFARM. THE TWO COMPANIES HAVE COMPETING PRODUCTS AND THIS WAY NEITHER WILL BE FAVOURED.



LET'S DISCUSS THIS CASE...



*GIORGIA IS ONE OF THE EDITORS OF A SUCCESSFUL HEALTH INFORMATION PODCAST. SHE THINKS IT IS APPROPRIATE TO DEDICATE AN EPISODE TO A STORY THAT IS BEING DISCUSSED A LOT IN THE STATES.*

*A LEADING PHARMACEUTICAL COMPANY IN THE PRODUCTION OF HYGIENE AND COSMETICS PRODUCTS NEGLECTED TO CARRY OUT PROPER CHECKS ON THE PRODUCTION LINE OF A CONSUMER PRODUCT AND SOME BATCHES MAY HAVE BEEN CONTAMINATED WITH A CARCINOGEN.*

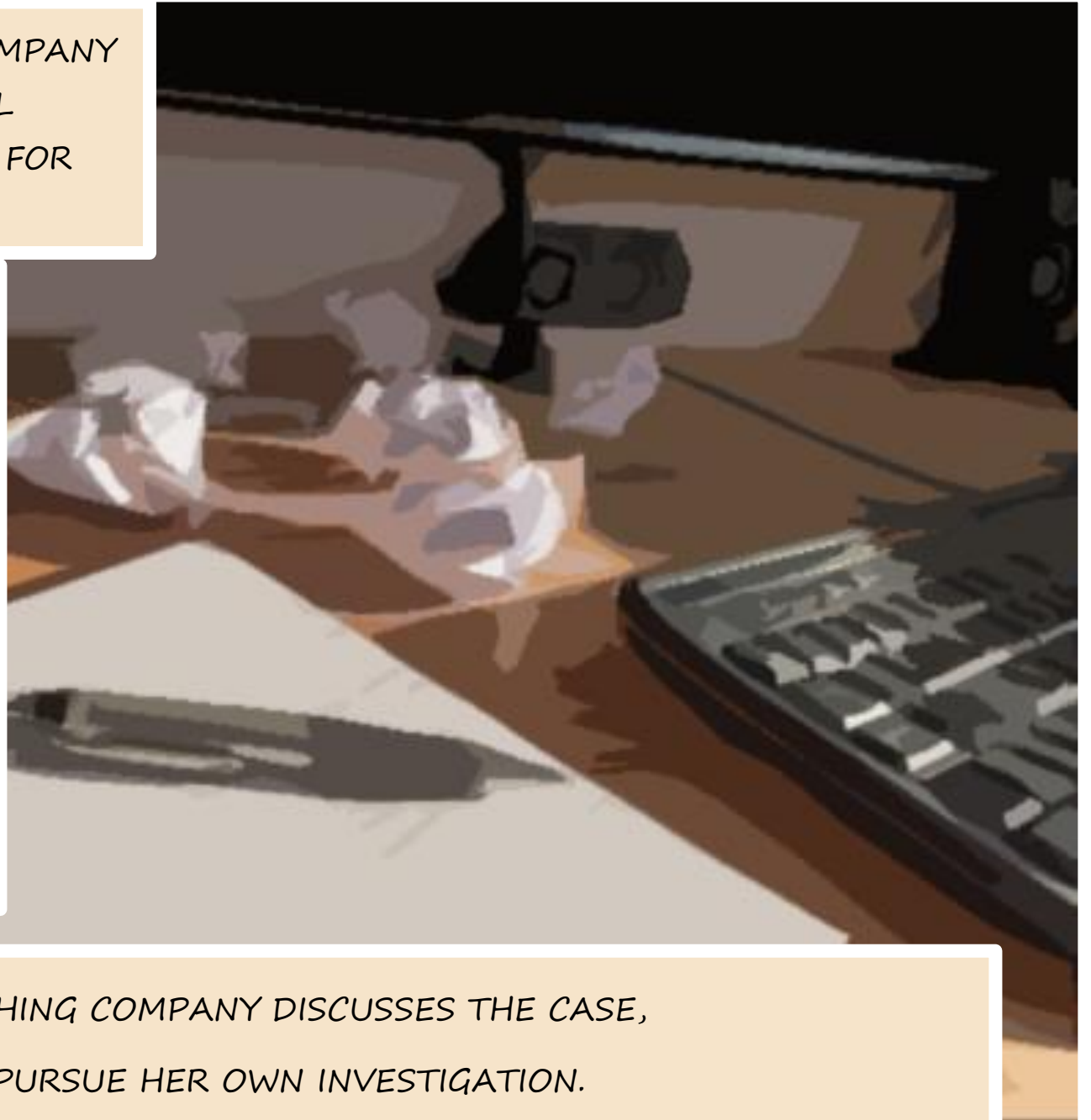


GIORGIA STUDIED THE STORY BY READING THE MANY AVAILABLE SOURCES AND LISTENING TO SOME US REPORTERS WHO FOLLOWED THE CASE. SHE TRIED TO GET IN TOUCH WITH THE COMPANY'S ITALIAN OFFICE, WHICH DECLINED THE INVITATION TO BE HEARD.





AFTER THE FIRST EPISODE OF THE PODCAST, THE COMPANY THAT MARKETS THE PRODUCT TERMINATES ALL COLLABORATION WITH THE PUBLISHING COMPANY FOR WHICH GIORGIA WORKS.



THE MANAGEMENT OF THE PUBLISHING COMPANY DISCUSSES THE CASE, BUT LEAVES GIORGIA FREE TO PURSUE HER OWN INVESTIGATION.



GIORGIA CONCLUDES THE PODCAST SERIES SHE HAS JUST STARTED. HOWEVER, SHE DECIDES NOT TO DEAL WITH SUCH TOPICS ANY MORE TO AVOID PUTTING HER OWN JOB AND THAT OF HER COLLEAGUES AT RISK. ESPECIALLY THE YOUNGER ONES (1, 2, 3) WHO ARE ALWAYS VERY EXPOSED ALSO BECAUSE OF THE PRECARIETY OF LABOUR CONTRACTS.

1. Hanusch F, Banjac S, Maeres P. The power of commercial influences: How experience pressure from advertising and public relations. *Journalism Pract* 2020;14(9):1029-46.

2. Blum D, Smart A, Zeller Jr T. *A tactical guide to science journalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022..

3. Hanusch F, Hanitzsch T, Lauerer C. 'How much love are you going to give this brand?' Lifestyle journalists on commercial influences in their work. *Journalism*. 2017 Feb;18(2):141-58.



THE EDITORIAL STAFF DISAGREES WITH GIORGIA'S CHOICE. THEY ARE AFRAID OF LOSING THEIR IDENTITY AND IN THE END THIS WOULD BE DETRIMENTAL TO EVERYONE.



MEANWHILE, THE COMPANY DEVISES A STRATEGY TO LIMIT THE DAMAGE. IT COMMISSIONS AN AGENCY TO PRODUCE A SERIES OF VIDEO INTERVIEWS WITH EXPERTS WHO - WITHOUT MAKING DIRECT REFERENCES TO THE PRODUCT UNDER DISCUSSION - CAN SCALE DOWN THE EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM.



*"I'M NOT ADVERTISING ANYTHING:  
THIS IS MY VERY POINT OF VIEW."*

*WHEN SIGNING THE CONTRACT WITH ONE OF THE EXPERTS, THE 'PROFESSOR' REFUSES TO ACCEPT THE CLAUSE THAT THE INTERVIEW SHOULD BE FILMED ON SOCIAL MEDIA WITH THE HASHTAG #ADV. THE EDITORIAL TEAM THEREFORE DECIDES TO INDICATE THE FUNDING RECEIVED IN THE SOCIAL CAMPAIGN SUPPORTING THE VIDEO INTERVIEWS.*



LET'S DISCUSS ALSO THIS CASE...



BIANCA IS AN HEALTH JOURNALIST. HER EXPERIENCE MAKES HER CRITICAL ABOUT THE CREDIBILITY OF STUDIES CONDUCTED ON SMALL SAMPLES OR EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF AN INTERVENTION ON THE BASIS OF POOR FINDINGS. IT'S SUNDAY AND OVER COFFEE HE'S READING THE E-ALERTS OF VARIOUS MEDICAL JOURNALS THAT CAME OUT DURING THE WEEK: NOW HE'S IN THE CAMPAIGN, NEAR MILAN...







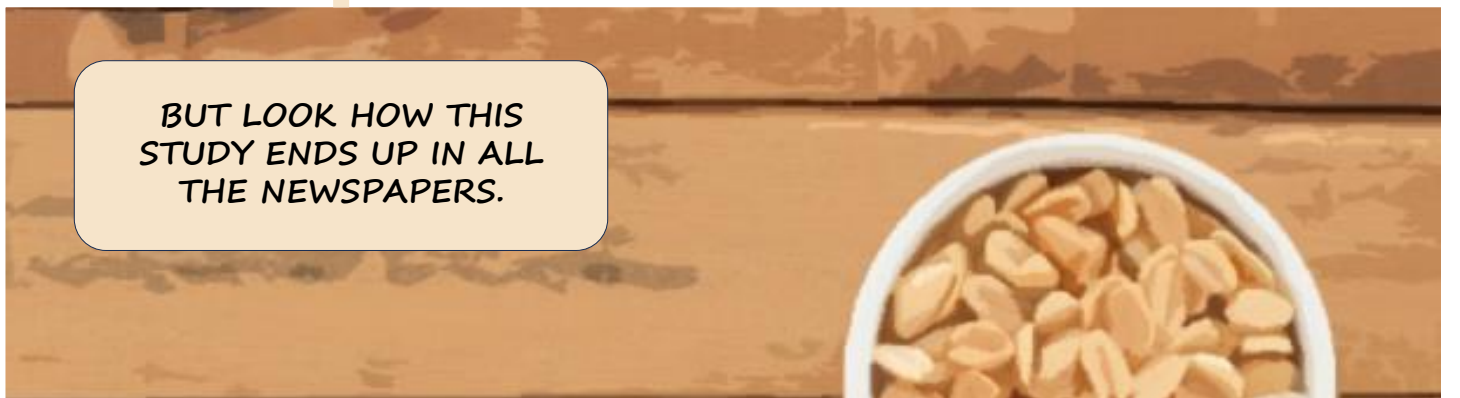
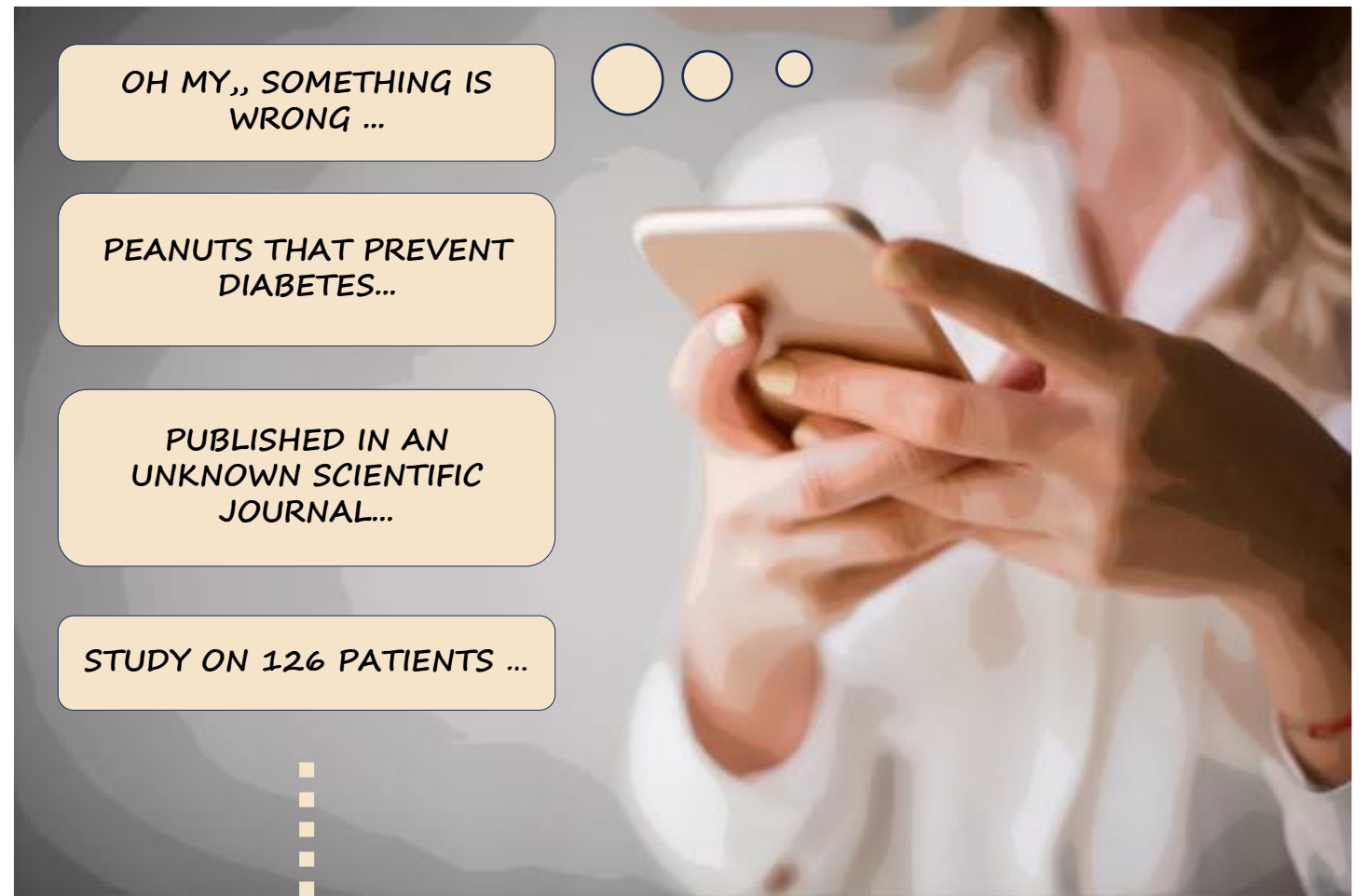
OH MY,, SOMETHING IS  
WRONG ...

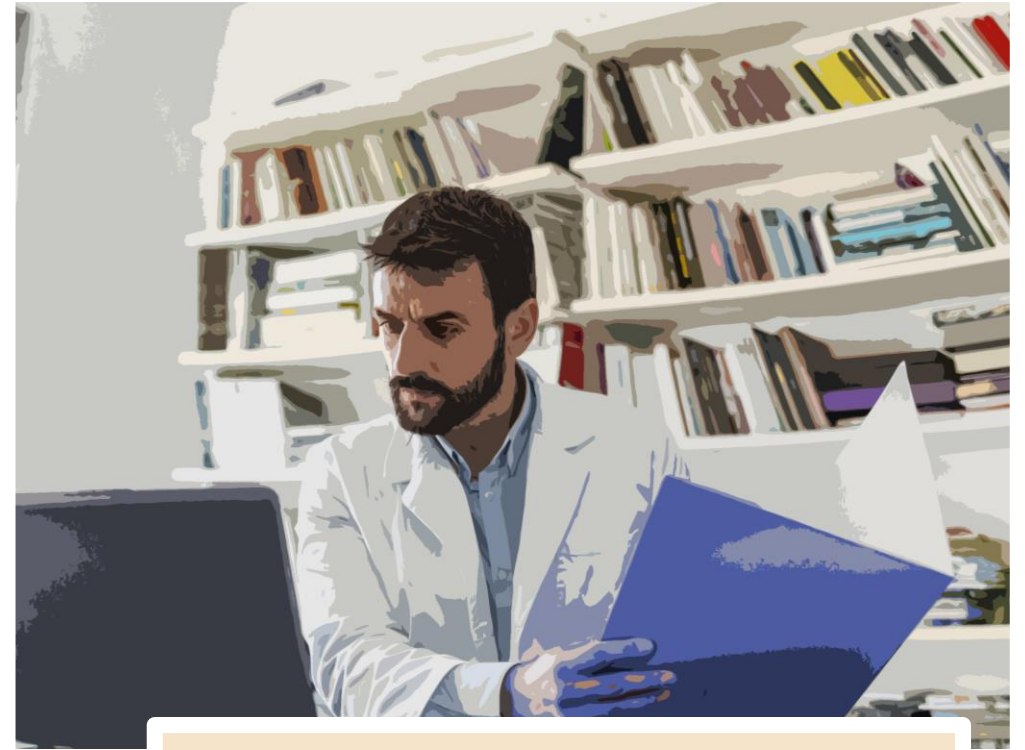
PEANUTS THAT PREVENT  
DIABETES...

PUBLISHED IN AN  
UNKNOWN SCIENTIFIC  
JOURNAL...

STUDY ON 126 PATIENTS ...

BUT LOOK HOW THIS  
STUDY ENDS UP IN ALL  
THE NEWSPAPERS.





CARLOS IS A MEDICAL RESEARCHER AT A UNIVERSITY IN THE USA. HIS IS THE FIRST AUTHOR OF THE PAPER READ BY BIANCA. A SIMPLE STUDY TO BE CARRIED OUT AND HIGH PROBABILITY OF BEING CITED...

... AND IT IS KNOWN HOW  
NUTRITIONAL RESEARCH IS  
EXPOSED TO BIAS AND CONFLICTS  
OF INTEREST (1).

Viewpoint

ONLINE FIRST FREE

August 23, 2018

## The Challenge of Reforming Nutritional Epidemiologic Research

John P. A. Ioannidis, MD, DSc<sup>1</sup>

[Author Affiliations](#) | [Article Information](#)

JAMA. Published online August 23, 2018. doi:10.1001/jama.2018.11025

Further, more the literature is shaped by investigators who report nonprespecified results that are possible to analyze in very different ways.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, meta-analyses become weighted averages of expert opinions. In an inverse sequence, instead of carefully conducted primary studies informing guidelines, expert-driven guidelines shaped by advocates dictate what primary studies should report. Not surprisingly, an independent assessment by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine of the national dietary guidelines suggested major redesign of the development process for these guidelines, improving transparency, promoting diversity of expertise and experience, supporting a more deliberative process, managing biases and conflicts, and adopting state-of-the-art processes.<sup>5</sup>

1. Ioannidis JP. The challenge of reforming nutritional epidemiologic research. *Jama* 2018;320(10):969-70.







THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY ARE POSITIVE. CONSUMING PEANUTS EVERY DAY REDUCES BMI AND FASTING BLOOD SUGAR VALUES. BIANCA CHECKS: THE STUDY IS NOT SPONSORED AND IS FUNDED BY THE UNIVERSITY.

TO CLARIFY HER DOUBTS, BIANCA WRITES TO CARLOS ASKING FOR INFORMATION. CARLOS REASSURES HER: THE STUDY IS ALSO CORRECTLY REGISTERED ON CLINICALTRIALS.GOV

NIH National Library of Medicine  
National Center for Biotechnology Information

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## About ClinicalTrials.gov

What is ClinicalTrials.gov and who uses it?

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ClinicalTrials.gov:

- Relies on sponsors or investigators to submit and update information about studies
- Is up-to-date information on clinical research studies and their results with new studies added multiple times every day
- Includes studies that take place in all 50 states and over 200 countries





IN THE MEANTIME, THE STUDY TURNED INTO A NEWS STORY THAT WENT AROUND THE WORLD. MERIT ALSO GOES TO THE UNIVERSITY'S MEDIA MANAGER WHO PREPARED A PERFECT PRESS RELEASE TAILORED TO THE STYLE OF THE VARIOUS INTERNATIONAL MEDIA (2).

2. Sumner P, et al. The association between exaggeration in health related science news and academic press releases. *BMJ* 2014;349.

THE NEWS WAS ALSO REPORTED ON THE WEBSITE OF AN ITALIAN SCIENTIFIC SOCIETY. INTRIGUED, BIANCA ASKED THE SOCIETY WHY THIS WAS SO...





HELLO, PROFESSOR? I AM SURPRISED TO SEE THIS NEWS REPORTED ON THE COMPANY WEBSITE...

I MUST CONFESS THAT I KNEW NOTHING ABOUT IT. YOU WILL UNDERSTAND HOW IMPOSSIBLE IT IS FOR ME TO CONTROL THE CONTENTS OF OUR SITE...

SO WHO TAKES CARE OF IT?

THE SITE IS MAINTAINED BY AN AGENCY, FIND THE CONTACTS IN THE CREDITS...



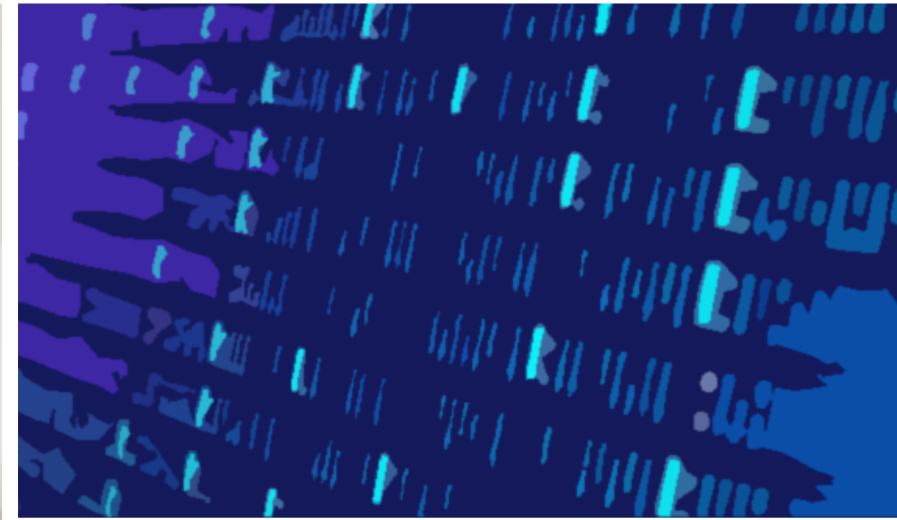
THE EDITOR OF THE COMPANY'S WEBSITE AND SOCIAL PRESENCE IS GIORGIO. HE DOES NOT ACTUALLY CHOOSE THE NEWS TO BE PUBLISHED: HE RECEIVES PROPOSALS FROM SOME COLLABORATORS. SO BIANCA OFFERS HERSELF AS A COLLABORATOR BUT HAS SOME DOUBTS AFTER GIORGIO TELLS HER THAT FOR EACH NEWS SHE WOULD ONLY RECEIVE A PAYMENT OF 20 EUROS (3).





DOUBTS REMAIN ABOUT THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE STUDY. IT IS REALLY STRANGE THAT A UNIVERSITY DECIDES TO FINANCE RESEARCH ON A SPECIFIC FOOD IN RELATION TO THE RISK OF FALLING ILL WITH SUCH A WIDESPREAD DISEASE. AT THIS POINT, BIANCA REMEMBERED THAT SHE KNOWS A RESEARCHER WHO WORKS AT THE SAME UNIVERSITY AS CARLOS.





*A FEW DAYS AFTER BIANCA'S E-MAIL, DAVID REPLIED BY SENDING HER THE DETAILS OF THE FUNDING GIVEN BY THE AMERICAN PEANUT COUNCIL DIRECTLY TO THE UNIVERSITY AND NOT TO THE RESEARCHERS.*



UNIVERSITIES RAISE PRIVATE FUNDING  
FOR RESEARCH IN GENERAL...

AND THEREFORE ARE NOT ALWAYS  
DECLARED IN THE DISCLOSURE OF  
PUBLISHED WORKS...

IS A WAY TO RECOVER INVESTMENTS  
QUICKLY...

DESPITE THE FACT THAT IT IS  
DETRIMENTAL TO RESEARCH ACTIVITY AS  
A WHOLE IN THE LONG TERM... (4)



SOME MORE DEBATE?

Conflicts of interest are a risk situation.  
They are not a sentence for someone's guilt.

Counteracting conflicts of interest is increasingly difficult, both because private interests are becoming more and more prevalent in healthcare and because public-private relations are encouraged at every institutional level.