Ghost-statistics, raw data and the meaning of authorship

Radical Statistics reporter

In Radical Statistics 94, Aubrey Blumsohn described ways in which pharmaceutical companies could find senior academic authors to front biased company studies.

At the British Medical Council's 'Fitness to practise panel' sitting 2nd – 5th November 2009, Professor Richard Eastell admitted that he did not have access to the raw data for a study published in the *Journal of Bone and Mineral Research* with himself as lead-author. In the article he presented analyses from Proctor and Gamble's statisticians, describing clinical trials that demonstrated advantages for one of their drugs for treating osteoporosis.

After concerns from Eastell's collaborator (Aubrey Blumsohn) and a long period during which Proctor and Gamble refused to share the data and Professor Eastell feared that demanding it would prejudice the company's funding of his department, the data were provided.

A further article admitted that among other errors, the authors were unaware that a crucial graph in the paper had been cropped in an asymmetrical way and excluded "between 34% and 49% of the more extreme values." This significantly affected the analyses and the claims for the osteoporosis drug.

The British Medical Council's panel, chaired by Professor M Whitehouse, found that Eastell had been negligent but not dishonest. This is hard to swallow, since the journals that the original article were submitted to required that raw data were available for all submissions. He was found not guilty of misconduct and deemed not deserving of a warning since he had admitted an error and had changed his practice to prevent the same happening again.

That Eastell, a former research dean of Sheffield University's medical school, should be forced to employ legal counsel in a hearing undertaken to standards of a court of law, must have stirred and shaken him personally. But the ruling does nothing to ensure that academics are not bought by company funds, and that trial data on which rest public health and public expenditure are available for independent analysis.

In December 2009, it took a professional and media campaign to force manufacturer Roche to make a commitment to publish data behind its claims for Tamiflu, used to control the apparent influenza pandemic in 2009.

References:

Aubrey Blumsohn (2007) Ghost statistics, raw data and the meaning of ownership. Are we learning any lessons from scandals in pharmaceutical research? Radical Statistics 94.

British Medical Journal preview of Eastell's hearing: http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/339/sep30_3/b3990

British Medical Journal on access to Roche data on Tamiflu: http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/339/dec10_2/b5405

Eastell R, Barton I, Hannon RA, Chines A, Garnero P, Delmas PD (2003) Relationship of early changes in bone resorption to the reduction in fracture risk with risedronate. J Bone Miner Res **18**:1051-1056.

Eastell R, Hannon RA, Garnero P, Campbell MJ, Delmas PD (2007) Letter of Response: Relationship of early changes in bone resorption to the reduction in fracture risk with risedronate: Review of Statistical Analysis. J Bone Miner Res **22**:1656-1660.

General Medical Council minutes: http://www.gmc-uk.org/static/documents/content/Anon_Eastell_Minutes.pdf