



# A Plea on Behalf of Expert Evaluation and the Experts Involved

Christopher P Wild, Vincent James Cogliano

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## A Plea on Behalf of Expert Evaluation and the Experts Involved

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**A Plea on Behalf of Expert Evaluation and the Experts Involved**

In recent letters to *IJE*<sup>1</sup> and elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> Drs McLaughlin, Lipworth, Tarone, La Vecchia, Blot, and Boffetta twice use the term “careerism” to suggest that among scientists participating in exercises such as the Monographs Programme of the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), “many have a vested interest in advancing their own research results in the deliberations, if only to increase their prestige and future funding opportunities.” The writers go on to assert that such researchers are motivated by self-interest, creating a conflict of interests that they believe inhibits the objectivity of the evaluation process. Their application of the term “conflict of interest” to the near-universal quality of ambition risks diverting attention from the serious problem of organizations that do not disclose funding sources and experts who receive money from parties with a stake in the outcome of an evaluation. Their criticism also fails to appreciate that most senior scientists have earned their reputations based on studying many topics and that the Monographs integrate findings from all researchers and disciplines. Most disquieting, however, is that the repeated indictment by McLaughlin *et al.* betrays a rather sour and cynical view of their colleagues.

The view of McLaughlin *et al.* is not one that accords with our own experience. Since 1971, more than 1200 scientists from over 50 countries have participated in the Working Groups that develop *IARC Monographs* on suspected carcinogenic hazards. These individuals, from a vast variety of backgrounds, cultures and professional experiences, donate many hours of their time in evaluating the pertinent scientific evidence. As noted above, we would certainly not deny that individuals have career ambitions, however, the conclusion by McLaughlin *et al.* that ambition translates so narrowly as to render scientists incapable of objectivity does a disservice to the cancer research community. Instances where experts place undue emphasis on their own research are the rare exception and are rectified through discussion at Working Group meetings. The writers’ alternative suggestion that a working group be made up of “experienced and well-trained investigators who are not professionally invested in the topic” carries its own risks of sacrificing scientific expertise and of introducing other routes to “careerism.”

We would like, therefore, to balance the view of McLaughlin *et al.* by our own observation that the overwhelming majority of *IARC Monographs* Working Group members are motivated by a desire to improve public health by identifying the causes of human cancer and thereby contributing to disease prevention. As experts they have strong and often competing views, and out of this mix of experience emerges a consensus delivered by top-quality scientists with the best specialist knowledge available. While no human activity is perfect, we would argue that expert evaluation, guided by complete transparency of funding sources and strong rules of engagement as encompassed in the Preamble to the *IARC Monographs* (<http://monographs.iarc.fr/>), is the best approach available.

CP Wild  
VJ Coglianò

## References

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2. McLaughlin JK, La Vecchia C, Tarone RE, Lipworth L, Blot WJ. Response. *J Natl Cancer Inst* 2010;**102**:134–135.