

IARC cancer agency mounts PR effort as probe of possible corruption grows

Usually, when a non-profit organization mentions “friends,” it’s part of a fundraising campaign. But for the International Agency for Research on Cancer, its “friends” [announcement listed](#) its supporters, as it referred to itself as the “cancer community’s authoritative, independent reference and the ultimate custodian of the truth.”

The move comes as the IARC, a research arm of the World Health Organization, finds itself under increasing scrutiny in the wake of its decision in 2015 to classify glyphosate as “probably carcinogenic,” using what is called a hazard evaluation. The IARC classification was widely circulated by anti-chemical and ant-GMO advocacy groups, which argued for bans or tighter restrictions. The move has been widely criticized by scientists and regulatory bodies around the world.

The Friends announcement, made in November 2017, marks the first time a United Nations agency has launched a public relations effort to show its influence and reputation. The 50-year-old agency is under pressure from the US House of Representatives, which has demanded (and been refused) information on the agency’s decision-making process involving the determination of cancer risk. The agency also has been the subject of news stories (mainly from Reuters) reporting that it deliberately rejected information supporting the non-cancerous properties of the popular herbicide glyphosate and is facing increasing criticism about its methodology in determining cancer risks from other regulatory and public health organizations.

The Friends of IARC list is impressive. Its 19 members include Princess Dina Mired of Jordan; Pekka Puska, Finnish Member of Parliament and former head of that country’s national health institute; retired heads of other UN-connected agencies such as the Pan American Health Organization and World Health Organization; and research scientists. Three members of the “friends” are Nobel Laureates Harold Varmus, Harald zur Hausen and Tomas Lindahl. Another is Nubia Munoz, a Colombian cancer researcher who was, according to the Friends site, “nominated for the Nobel Prize in Medicine” in 2008 (except for Peace, nominees who don’t receive prizes are never publicly announced).

It is not clear what makes a “friend of IARC.” But according to the website:

The Friends of IARC are our ambassadors, testifying to the work and values of the Agency and supporting us in reaching out to society and stakeholders, in order to reach our goal of reducing the global burden of cancer.

Many friends are also recipients of the IARC [medal of honor](#), given to “acknowledge and reward the work of scientists whose research has made an outstanding contribution to advancing our understanding of the biology or of the epidemiology of cancer.” Recipients who are also Friends include Richard Peto, Richard Klausner, David Lane, zur Hausen, Varmus, Munoz, and Princess Mired.

While all of these recipients and members are noted leaders in their fields, it is highly unusual for a UN agency to set up a friends site.

However, IARC has been needing some public relations help, due to several developments:

- IARC gained notoriety mainly because its determination in a 2015 Monograph that glyphosate, the active ingredient in the herbicide RoundUp (that patent has now lapsed), was a “probable carcinogen.” No other regulatory or advisory agency, including IARC’s parent organization, WHO, has declared the herbicide to be carcinogenic. However, IARC’s ruling was quickly supported by non-government organizations, including Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, in their efforts to halt the public use of genetically modified crops, many of which are bred to grow even in the presence of glyphosate.
- A Reuters story earlier in 2017 reported that IARC had overlooked data showing no connection between glyphosate and cancer. However, according to Reuters, IARC member and US National Cancer Institute epidemiologist Aaron Blair knew about—but did not share—the study’s results:

Previously unreported court documents reviewed by Reuters from an ongoing U.S. legal case against Monsanto show that Blair knew the unpublished research found no evidence of a link between glyphosate and cancer. In a sworn deposition given in March this year in connection with the case, Blair also said the data would have altered IARC’s analysis. He said it would have made it less likely that glyphosate would meet the agency’s criteria for being classed as “probably carcinogenic.

Why didn’t Blair share the data? Because he couldn’t—it was at the time unpublished and IARC rules forbid review of unpublished reports.

- Meanwhile, US Congressional inquiries have continued to dig into IARC’s decision-making process. Representatives Lamar Smith, Andy Biggs and Frank Lucas wrote IARC director Chris Wild, first demanding he testify before the House Science and Technology Committee. After Wild refused, the Congressmen wrote again, in December threatening to withdraw support for IARC if he does not reconsider his refusal to provide information and testify before the Committee:

Since 1985, IARC has received more than \$48 million from NIH, \$22 million of which has gone to the Monograph Programme (IMO). The U.S. Constitution grants Congress the power to oversee the spending of taxpayer dollars. As such, the Committee is required to carry out its Constitutional duty to ensure the stewardship of these funds. Given that the Committee has questions regarding the scientific integrity of the IMO, the Committee may decide to consider the appropriateness of providing continued U.S. federal government funding for the program. In light of these considerations, the Committee requests that IARC reconsider its position and provide a list of potential witnesses who are available to testify before the Committee.

- And, while IARC’s friends include three Nobelists, [another group](#) of prominent toxicologists from Europe and the United States, declared that IARC’s “cancer classification on hazard-identification

such as IARC and UN GHS are outmoded.” The scientists also pointed to the fallacy of IARC’s placement of chemicals with different potencies and modes of action, and warned that the WHO arm was triggering unnecessary health scares, and diversion of public funds to investigate cancer risks.

All in all, IARC’s needs may extend beyond boosters.

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