

Why did the EPA fire a respected toxicologist?

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In March, the US House Energy and Commerce Committee launched an investigation into potential conflicts of interest in scientific panels that advise the Environmental Protection Agency on the human health effects of toxic chemicals. The committee identified eight scientists that served as consultants or members of EPA science advisory panels while getting research support from the chemical industry to study the chemicals under review. Two scientists were actually employed by companies that made or worked with manufacturers of the chemicals under review.

Such conflicts, Chairman John Dingell (D-Mich.) noted, stand in stark contrast to the agency's dismissal last summer of highly respected public health scientist Deborah Rice, an expert in toxicology, from a panel examining the health impacts of the flame retardant deca. The EPA fired Rice after the chemical industry's trade group, the American Chemistry Council, complained that she could not provide an objective scientific review because she had spoken out about the health hazards posed by deca.

This trend is neither new nor unique, argues legendary lead researcher Herbert Needleman, a pediatrician and child psychiatrist, in a new article published this week in the open-access journal *PLoS Biology*.

With his groundbreaking research on the cognitive effects of lead on children, Needleman laid the foundation for one of the greatest environmental health successes of modern times—five-fold reduction in the prevalence of lead poisoning in American children.

In “The Case of Deborah Rice: Who is the Environmental Protection Agency Protecting?” Needleman points out that the EPA summarily fired Rice even though it had honored her just a few years before with one of its most prestigious scientific awards for “exceptionally high-quality research into lead’s toxicity.” Why? Because the American Chemistry Council asked the agency to fire her.

“EPA, without examining or contesting the charge of bias, complied,” Needleman write. “Rice was fired. The next formal act of the EPA was to remove all of her comments from the written report completely erase her name from the text of the review. There is now no evidence that she ever participated in the EPA proceedings, or was even in the room.” Needleman is confident that Rice, who is “widely admired by her colleagues for her intelligence, integrity and moral compass,” will “withstand this insult and continue to contribute to the public welfare.”

Source: Public Library of Science

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