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Biology & Society

Who Should Fund Product Safety Studies?

Biology plays a major role in the research, development, and production of food, medicine, and other consumer items. Companies that make these items profit by selling reliable and useful products in the marketplace. For example, the plastics industry provides countless products for everyday use.

But sometimes questions arise concerning product safety. Bisphenol-A (BPA), for instance, is a chemical found in hard plastics. These plastics are used to make baby bottles, reusable water bottles, and the linings of many food and soft drink cans. Is BPA safe? This type of question can be posed as a scientific hypothesis to be tested. But who does the testing? Who funds the studies and analyzes the results?

Health-independent scientists test products for safety and usefulness. That way, the people who gather and analyze data can remain objective—they have nothing to gain by exaggerating the positive effects of products and nothing to lose by stating any risks. However, scientists are often lured by private companies to develop or test their products.

Often, test results are clear: A product is safe or it isn't. Based on these results, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) or another government agency makes recommendations to protect and promote public health. Sometimes, though, results are tough to interpret.

More than 100 studies have been done on BPA—some funded by the government, some funded by the plastics industry. Most of the independent studies found that low doses of BPA could have negative health effects on laboratory animals. A few studies, mostly funded by the plastics industry, concluded that BPA is safe. In this case, the FDA ultimately declared BPA to be safe. When the issue of BPA safety hit the mass media, government investigations began. So, who should sponsor product safety studies?

The Viewpoints

Independent Organizations

Should Fund Safety Studies

Scientists performing safety studies should have no affiliation with private industries, because conflict of interest seems unavoidable. A company, such as a BPA manufacturer, would naturally benefit if its product is declared to be safe. Rather, safety tests should be funded by independent organizations such as universities and government agencies, which should be as independent as possible. This way, recommendations for public health can remain free of biases.

Private Industries Should Fund Safety Studies

There are an awful lot of products out there! Who would pay scientists to test all those products? There are simply too many potentially useful and valuable products being developed by private industry for the government to keep track of and test adequately with public funds. It is in a company's best interest to produce safe products, so it would be inclined to maintain high standards and perform rigorous tests.

Research and Decide

1. Analyze the Viewpoints To make an informed decision, research the current status of the controversy over BPA by using the Internet and other resources. Compare this situation with the history of safety studies on cigarette smoke and the chemical Teflon.

2. Form an Opinion Should private industries be able to pay scientists to perform their product safety studies? How would you deal with the issue of potential bias in interpreting results?



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