

American Council on Science and Health

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The **American Council on Science and Health** (**ACSH**) is a nonprofit (501(c)(3)) organization founded in 1978 by Dr. Elizabeth Whelan that produces peer-reviewed reports on issues related to food, nutrition, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, lifestyle, the environment and health. Its core membership is a board of 350 physicians, scientists and policy advisors who review the Council's reports and participate in ACSH seminars, press conferences, media communications and other educational activities.^[1]

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About

History and mission

ACSH describes itself as a "consumer education consortium". Founded in 1978 by Dr. Elizabeth Whelan, the group describes its mission as "to add reason and balance to debates about public health issues and bring common sense scientific views to the public."^[2]

ACSH's current "Medical/Executive Director" is Gilbert Ross, M.D.^[3] Just prior to joining the ACSH staff in 1998, Ross served more than a year in prison and had his medical license revoked over his role in a Medicare fraud scheme. His medical license was not reinstated until 2004.^[4]

Governance

Founder Dr. Elizabeth S. Whelan remains the President of the American Council on Science and Health. The organization is governed by a board of trustees. The board currently consists of: Nigel M. Bark, M.D., Albert Einstein College of Medicine; James E. Enstrom, Ph.D., M.P.H., University of California, Los Angeles; Hon. Bruce S. Gelb; Elizabeth McCaughey, Ph.D., Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths; Henry I. Miller, M.D., The Hoover Institute; Kenneth M. Prager, M.D., Columbia University Medical Center; Lee M. Silver, Ph. D., Princeton University; Thomas P. Stossel, M.D., Harvard Medical School; Robert Fauber, M.B.A., Moody's Corporation; Elizabeth Rose, Aim High Productions, Esq.; Harold D. Stratton, Jr., J.D., Brownstein Hyatt Faber Schreck LLP; Glenn Swogger, Jr., M.D., The Menninger Clinic (ret.); Donald Drakeman, J.D., Ph.D., Advent Ventures, LLP; Davis S. Stare, The Stare Fund; Bruce Randolph Tizes, M.D., J.D., Galt Capital; Myron C. Harrison, M.D., M.P.H., The Woodlands, TX; Kevin Holzclaw, M.S., Boulder, CO; and Paul A. Offit, M.D., University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine.

ACSH's Founder's Circle consists of Norman E. Borlaug (1914 – 2009), Ph.D., Nobel Laureate, Texas A&M University (Years of Service to ACSH: 1978 – 2009); and Fredrick J. Stare (1910 – 2002), M.D., Ph.D., Harvard School of Public Health (Years of Service to ACSH: 1978 – 2002).^[5]

Funding

ACSH stopped reporting its funding in early 1990s.^[6] Their 1991 report shows that many corporations contributed funds.^[6] In 1996, *Congressional Quarterly's* Public Interest Profiles stated that ACSH received more than 75 percent of their funding from the chemical and pharmaceutical industries. Jeff Stier, Associate Director of ACSH, has responded that this information is outdated and inaccurate, with ACSH receiving less than 50 percent of their funding from industry. Tierney also pointed out in the *New York Times* piece that Harvard University and other research organizations also receive large amounts of corporate funds.^[7]

While ACSH does not currently disclose their funding, Whelan described ACSH's contributors to John Tierney of the *New York Times* in 2007: "ACSH has a diverse funding base - we receive donations from private foundations and individuals and unrestricted (usually very small) grants from corporations. The fastest-growing segment of our funding base is individual consumers who are sick and tired of the almost daily baseless scares - and they write us checks to help support our work."

Issue advocacy

ACSH frequently defends science against claims that industry products create risks of injury, ill-health or death. ACSH criticizes some industries for making unscientific and overstated health claims, promoting dangerous natural supplements, or otherwise failing to tell the truth about scientific issues. Scientific and professional journals routinely publish ACSH's work, including: *Medscape*, *CRC Critical Reviews in Clinical Laboratory Sciences*, *Ecotoxicology and Environmental Safety*, *Journal of Health Communications*, *Clinical Therapeutics*, and *Technology*. ASCH focuses its studies in several areas.

Chemicals/environment

ACSH frequently warns against regulating chemicals without scientific proof of harms. A 2009 editorial by board member Henry Miller in *Investor's Business Daily* criticized the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), saying, "An EPA hit list of important and demonstrably safe chemicals is about to be put through the regulatory wringer, and many are likely to be banned or severely restricted. These include bisphenol-A, phthalates, lifesaving flame retardants, the herbicide atrazine and fluorinated chemicals used to make Teflon."^[8]

ACSH had previously defended the safety of phthalates, most recently publishing a critical review in the *Journal of Toxicology and Environmental Health*.^[9] ACSH's advocacy on the issue extends back to 1999, when they worked with former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop to defend the ingredient used in many soft plastics.^[10]

Food safety and nutrition

ACSH has advocated against taxes on governmentally determined "unhealthy" food as a means to combat obesity.^[11] The group opposed New York state's move to require food chains to post calorie information on their products.^[12] ACSH has also called for better regulation and testing of dietary supplements.^[13]

Diseases and pharmaceuticals

ACSH criticized Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz's Breast Cancer Education and Awareness Requires Learning Young Act as focusing on detection methods that were not scientifically supported and distracting from more effective measures.^[14] The group worked to clarify unclear messages and dispel myths surrounding the swine flu outbreak in 2009.^[15] In 2008, ACSH applauded the American Academy of Pediatricians for demanding that an episode of *Eli Stone* carry a disclaimer since the show depicted a jury awarding damages based on the claim that a vaccine caused autism. ACSH has long been critical of groups who claim a supposed link between the two.^[16]

Terrorism

Following the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, ACSH opposed the appointment of a federal official to oversee and administer aid to those injured during the attacks and subsequent rescue, arguing that such a move would create another layer of bureaucracy between victims and aid.^[17] Further, the group criticized rescue workers who attempted to fraudulently receive financial compensation though they did not suffer injuries.^[18] ACSH also distributes information on how to prepare for and protect oneself from a terrorist attack.^[19]

Tobacco

ACSH has spoken out about the negative effects of smoking, calling into question Senator Barack Obama's health during the 2008 campaign.^[20] However, the group opposed a New York state law that outlawed certain types of smokeless tobacco because, they argued, it made it harder for adult smokers to quit cigarettes.^[21] ACSH also criticized Apple workers who refused to enter homes where smoking had taken place to make technical repairs out of concern over secondhand smoke.^[22]

Media appearances

Opinion editorials

ACSH routinely publicizes its campaigns by placing opinion editorials in news publications. Editorials from the group have appeared in publications including the *New York Post*, *Politico*, *Investor's Business Daily*, *The Washington Times*, *National Review* and the *Weekly Standard*.

Television news

ACSH spokespersons also appear on television news as pundits. Spokespeople from the group have appeared on CNBC, MSNBC, Fox News, ABC and NY1.

Daily Show

On the May 14, 2009 episode of the satirical late night show *The Daily Show*, correspondent Samantha Bee noted the ACSH's opposition to the Obama family's organic garden and the organization's funding by the petroleum, chemical, and pharmaceutical industries.^[23]

Big Fears, Little Risk

In 1990, ACSH produced a short film narrated by Walter Cronkite entitled *Big Fears, Little Risk* about the impact of chemicals on human health and environment.^[24]

Reviews and assessments

The ACSH is known as an "industry-friendly" group.^[25] In 1982, the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), a watchdog and consumer advocacy group, published an extensive report on ACSH's practices that stated, "ACSH appears to be a consumer fraud; as a scientific group, ACSH seems to arrive at conclusions before conducting studies. Through voodoo or alchemy, bodies of scientific knowledge are transmogrified into industry-oriented position statements."^[26] CSPI director Michael F. Jacobson said of ACSH, "'This organization promotes confusion among consumers about what is safe and what isn't... ACSH is using a slick scientific veneer to obscure and deny truths that virtually everyone else agrees with."^[27]

In regard to its operations and financial efficiency, the Better Business Bureau issued a Wise Giving report on ACSH in 2010. BBB concluded that ACSH met 19 of their 20 charity standards. These criteria include a board of directors with at least five members who oversee operations, do not have any conflicts of interest and only one of which is paid. ACSH missed one point for holding two rather than three annual board meetings.^[28] Further, the rating indicates that ACSH assesses its own performance, spends at least 65 percent of its total expenses on programs, spends no more than 35 percent of related contributions on fundraising, avoids accumulating funds, makes financial statements available upon request including a breakdown of expenses and that the charity abides by a budget. BBB also requires that informational materials and web sites be accurate and that charities create an annual report, clearly address privacy of donors and profits from merchandise sales and respond to any BBB inquiries.^[29] BBB reports that ACSH meets these standards.

In 2004, the now-defunct Tufts University Nutrition Navigator (a rating guide to nutrition websites) gave the ACSH site an overall rating of 20 out of 25 and an "Accuracy of Information" rating of 8 out of 10. However, it commented, "This site aims to arm consumers with the facts necessary to make wise decisions about health, but be aware that the information here is biased and represents a very conservative interpretation of current science. Consumers looking for a balanced debate on health issues will have to look elsewhere."^[30]

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See also

- American Chemistry Council

External links

- ACSH homepage (<http://www.acsh.org/>)
- Facts Versus Fears: A Review of the Greatest Unfounded Health Scares of Recent Times (<http://www.acsh.org/publications/reports/factsfears.html>) by ACSH
- Tufts Nutrition Navigator review of ACSH (<http://web.archive.org/http://navigator.tufts.edu/journalists/sites/158.html>)
- Daily Show segment on organic gardening featuring an ACSH representative (<http://www.thedailyshow.com/video/index.jhtml?videoId=227353&title=Little-Crop-of-Horrors>)

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