

## Drugs watchdog linked to pesticide company

By Rob Edwards, Environment Editor

**Britain's top** drugs safety watchdog has been forced to declare an interest in one of the world's largest pesticide companies, following an investigation by the Sunday Herald.

Sir Alasdair Breckenridge, the chairman of the UK government's Medicines and Health Care products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), decided late last week to formally register his involvement with Swiss agrochemical giant, Syngenta.

This was despite previously saying that there was no need to declare his interest. He changed his mind only after responding to a series of allegations about potential conflicts of interest.

The Sunday Herald can reveal that Breckenridge has been chairman of Syngenta's ethics committee for the last five years. The committee is responsible for approving company arrangements for testing toxic pesticides on human volunteers, a controversial and secretive practice.

The revelation has prompted fierce criticism from health and pesticides campaigners.

Alison Craig, of the Pesticides Action Network, said: "We find it disappointing that Sir Alasdair is participating in this activity.

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“It does not exactly inspire public confidence in the safety of medicines when the person at the top has for years been permitting the dosing of humans with toxic pesticides.”

The MHRA is the agency responsible for ensuring that all the medicines and medical equipment used in Britain are safe. It grants companies licences to manufacture and distribute drugs, and inspects medical laboratories.

Syngenta, headquartered in Basel, Switzerland, was formed in November 2000 from a merger between two chemical multinationals, Novartis and AstraZeneca. It employs some 20,000 people in more than 90 countries, including 300 at Grangemouth in Scotland, making herbicides, fungicides and insecticides.

Breckenridge, 68, who has previously chaired the Committee on the Safety of Medicines, was appointed by health ministers to chair the MHRA from its launch in April 2003. Born in Arbroath, Angus, he was formerly a professor of clinical pharmacology at the University of Liverpool.

When first questioned by the Sunday Herald three weeks ago, he confirmed that he was chairman of Syngenta’s ethics committee. But he maintained that there was “no connection” between the work of the multinational and the MHRA, so there was no need to declare the interest in the staff register.

But after it was pointed out that Syngenta had plans to move into the drugs business, he had a rethink.

On Friday, an MHRA spokeswoman said: “Sir Alasdair has, until very recently, been unaware that Syngenta had proposed to become involved in the field of human pharmaceuticals.

“However, now that he has been made aware of this, his unremunerated position on the ethics committee will be declared on the agency’s register of interests, in line with the MHRA staff code of conduct.”

The spokeswoman pointed out that the MHRA had not so far received any licence applications from Syngenta, and that Breckenridge did not give the company any advice on human medicinal products.

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“For these reasons, there is no conflict of interest between Sir Alasdair’s role at the MHRA and as chair of the ethics committee at Syngenta,” she argued.

This is disputed, however, by Charles Medawar, director of the health consumer watchdog in London, Social Audit.

“There is clearly a potential conflict of interest here,” he said. “He doesn’t make the distinction between being independent and being seen to be independent.”

This was also not the first time that Breckenridge had been caught up in controversy about an alleged conflict of interest, Medawar said. “It is very difficult for the public to have confidence in someone in his position.”

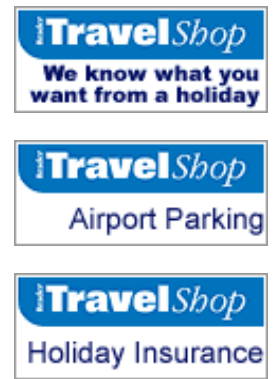
Medawar has previously called for Breckenridge’s resignation over alleged failings in regulating anti-depressant drugs suspected of making people feel suicidal. From 1992 to 1997, Breckenridge was a scientific adviser to SmithKline Beecham (now GlaxoSmith-Kline), which manufactured one of the drugs, Seroxat.

The MHRA also accepted there were some links between its work and that of Syngenta. MHRA staff had inspected a Syngenta laboratory involved in testing a proposed vaccine for the superbug MRSA.

Three members of the MHRA’s committee on the safety of medicines – professors Chipman, Park and Griffiths – declared interests in Syngenta in 2004. Ian Kimber, head of research at Syngenta’s central toxicology laboratory in Cheshire, is a member of the MHRA’s committee on the safety of devices.

“The links between Syngenta and the MHRA are far too close,” said anti-pesticide campaigner, Alison Craig.

In March, the House of Commons Health Committee accused MHRA of “serious weaknesses” and urged



an independent review.

New rules governing the declaration of interests by MHRA committee members come into force today .

The code of conduct for staff such as Breckenridge has also been recently revised and tightened.

According to Syngenta, Breckenridge was only paid expenses for being on the ethics committee. A spokes

man said: "The voluntary advice which Sir Alasdair and the panel provides places none of the members in

any potential conflicts of interest.

"Syngenta has no pharmaceutical products and is not submitting any to the MHRA at present," he added.

"Should Syngenta's position change in relation to the MHRA, we shall reconsider the position, as will no

doubt the MHRA."

*30 October 2005*

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