

Effectively silencing Canada's whistleblowers

Rulings prove this is not a safe country for honest employees, especially if they work for the federal government

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Last week an adjudicator at the Public Service Labour Relations Board handed down rulings related to three Health Canada scientists that confirm what many Canadians — and international observers — had already concluded: Canada is not a safe place for honest employees, especially if they work for the federal government.

After four-and-a-half years of proceedings, it took a further year for the adjudicator to deliver his 208-page decision, which dismissed seven out of eight grievances and ordered one whistleblower reinstated — but not the others. Having followed this case closely from the start, the end result seems absurd to me.

The scientists — Dr. Shiv Chopra, Margaret Haydon and Gerard Lambert — had for years valiantly resisted repeated efforts by Health Canada management to pressure them into approving the release of antibiotics, hormones and chemicals into the food supply without the legally required evidence of human safety. They asserted that this pressure came from the highest levels of the bureaucracy — the Privy Council Office — at the urging of powerful corporations.



Dr. Shiv Chopra is one of three Health Canada scientists who lost their jobs for trying to keep our food safe.

Their bravest moment was to raise the alarm to the Senate in 1998 regarding the imminent approval of Monsanto's bovine growth hormone. Their testimony caused headlines around the world and

led to the drug being banned in Canada and most other developed countries. For this alone they are known internationally and regarded as heroes.

They were promised protection for their testimony, but when all three were fired simultaneously in 2004 the Senate took no action. As their union battled to have them reinstated, the government agency created specifically to protect whistleblowers also sat

veniently out of the way, Health Canada rapidly approved seven drugs and other commercial products that the scientists had been blocking — including the use of Baytril (an antibiotic in the fluoroquinolone class) for veterinary purposes. This is a highly controversial decision that leaves Canada out of step with many other developed countries.

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The overuse of antibiotics on factory-farmed animals is recognized as the main source of "superbugs" — deadly new strains of diseases such as E. coli that have acquired the ability to resist most antibiotics. By approving Baytril, Health Canada has endangered what was our last line of defence. New strains are already emerging that are resistant to every existing antibiotic, including the fluoroquinolones.

Like many other drug approvals, this is a matter of life and death, and illustrates why we need Health Canada to be focused on protecting our health, not promoting corporate interests.

The PSLRB rulings follow hard on the heels of a closely related scandal — the outrageous misconduct of Christiane Ouimet, whose job was to protect government whistleblowers. Ouimet closed hundreds of files, often without proper examination, conducted few investigations and, unbelievably, managed to

find absolutely nothing amiss in the federal bureaucracy during her three-and-a-half years on the job.

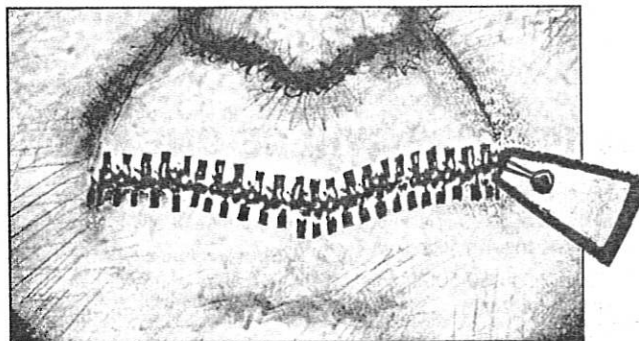
Her "punishment" for this misconduct, which was exposed by a whistleblower complaint to the Auditor General, was to be sent into early retirement on the equivalent of a full pension, complete with a \$500,000 "severance package." This sets a terrible precedent; is this how future wrongdoers will be sanctioned?

Our concerns regarding the board's decision only get worse as we look more closely at the process. For example, the principal alleged wrongdoer — the manager who is said to have orchestrated the scientists' abrupt dismissal — retired soon after, and was then hired by Treasury Board to coordinate the government's legal team, all at the taxpayer's expense. Access to information requests have revealed that she was paid close to \$1 million through a numbered company, effectively to defend her own actions.

There are good reasons why the fate of Chopra and his colleagues is being watched closely in other countries. The safety of our planet's food system is at greater risk now than any time in history — threatened by lethal superbugs, carcinogenic chemicals and pesticides, hormones, heavy metals and illegal additives.

In this context it seems incomprehensible that Canadian scientists who sacrificed their careers to keep our food safe are still being punished for their efforts.

Shame on Health Canada, shame on our government and shame on us if we turn our backs on honest employees such as these, who risk their careers to protect us.



STEVE ANSUL/NEWSART