

AIMBE as the Reliable Source

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The AIMBE Federal Symposium, sponsored by the Council of Societies, had presentations from industry, including one on the beneficial effects of pharmaceuticals in modern health care. As far as I recall, he did not refer to pharmaceuticals as “drugs,” nor did he present any data that disparaged the industry he represented or the products that they dispensed. For slide after slide he wove a wonderful tale of success and health through chemistry.

His message was so glowing, so convincing, that I nearly rushed out to the nearest CVS Pharmacy to fill myself with the elixirs of which he spoke. It was only the fact that I was occupying an interior seat and next to me was the most comfortable medical and biological engineer in the whole room that prevented me from pushing my way past. I am not so good at the vault.

But the more I listened, the more I wondered about the source of his data. Let’s see: he was talking about pharmaceuticals and he represented Pharma, the organization representing the pharmaceutical industry. I’ll bet the source of his information was the very companies that manufactured and marketed the drugs that he spoke about

And there is the rub: if we had gone the next day to talk to our Congresspeople and had parroted the message we heard, 1) I don’t think it would all have been believed, and 2) that would have weakened the believability of everything else we said. And it’s not just pharmaceuticals; Advamed, representing medical device industries, has a similarly-glowing report about the use of medical devices in health care; BIO, the

Biotechnology Industry Organization, would tell you only the best things about genetically-modified organisms. Wonderful as they are, they are not the final answer to all the questions we need to ask.

Messages coming from an industry group may or not be self-serving, may or may not be biased, and may or may not misrepresent the entire picture. They may or may not be these things but they certainly arouse suspicions that there is another side not being told.

AIMBE has an Industry Council, but AIMBE does not represent an industry segment. AIMBE also has a College of Fellows, Council of Societies, and Academic Council, and, because of that, it can be an effective independent organization to present reliable information concerning medical and biological engineering (MBE).

I cannot say that AIMBE has an unbiased stance, because AIMBE exists to promote MBE. But AIMBE should be able to present the warts along with the wonder workings of any particular MBE technology.

To view AIMBE as a quality-assurance organization that can substantiate effectiveness claims stretches the role of AIMBE, at least operationally. We have never in the past have had anyone working for AIMBE who could spend a considerable amount of time researching claims, independently checking data, and writing reports based on the findings. Congress used to have its Office of Technology Assessment (OTA), but that is long gone. There is a void that AIMBE could usefully fill. If funding can be found to employ such a person, AIMBE might garner additional attention and respect from the government, the media, and the public.

To maintain a reputation of honesty and reliability, however, AIMBE must be careful that funding for this person can come with few, if any, strings. Like Caesar's wife, there can be no reproach, no besmirching of reputation. AIMBE cannot become another Pharma, Advamed, or BIO. Information coming from AIMBE needs to be correct, verifiable, and believable. This can be done. It is a role AIMBE was meant to play.