

## News roundup

# Ties between regulators and business are attacked after politician takes top job in industry

New York Jeanne Lenzer

A Congressman who was responsible for an act prohibiting the US federal government from negotiating lower prices with drug companies has retired from Congress to take up a job with the pharmaceutical industry.

Congressman W J "Billy" Tauzin (Republican, Louisiana) announced that he will retire from Congress this month to take over as president of the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America. The group, the main US lobbying organization for the drug industry, has praised Mr. Tauzin for his leading role in crafting President Bush's Medicare Reform Bill, which contains a provision prohibiting the federal government negotiating with drug companies for lower prices. Critics attacked the provision as a "sweetheart deal" for the drug industry (*bmj.com*, 29 Nov 2003, *News Extra*).

As chairman of the House of Representatives' powerful Energy and Commerce Committee, Mr Tauzin served as an overseer of investigations into drug company fraud and abuse—a position he resigned in February 2004 when it emerged that he was considering a position as a lobbyist for the manufacturers' association.

Editorials in the *Washington Post* and elsewhere criticized the "revolving door" ethics of Washington politicians and the industries they are supposed to regulate, when it became known that Mr. Tauzin was considering the job. The newspapers also pointed out, however, that there was nothing illegal about Mr. Tauzin's move, as federal law did not prevent legislators from taking jobs with industry.

But although Mr Tauzin will not be allowed to lobby Congress directly, he will still be allowed to lobby the White House, and he can supervise others, instructing them in how to lobby Congress.

Saying that US drug makers have been given a "black eye" because of anger at high prices of drugs and recent recalls of top selling drugs, Mr Tauzin said he wants to help give a better image of drug companies because of his own experience as a patient. Mr Tauzin, who was given a diagnosis of colon cancer in February 2004, said in a recent interview, "I was treated with a miracle drug ... The question is what I wanted to do with the new life God has given me. This is the mission I want to take on."

(*USA Today*, 15 Dec 2004, [www.usatoday.com/money/industries/health/drugs/2004-12-15-drugs-usat\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/money/industries/health/drugs/2004-12-15-drugs-usat_x.htm))

But some critics say that Mr Tauzin's enthusiastic endorsement of the drug used to treat his colon cancer, bevacizumab (Avastin), used the sort of hyperbole that has contributed to some drugs being too highly promoted in the past, with the result that they have had to be withdrawn, or their makers have had to issue warnings about them. Allen Shaughnessy, a pharmacologist and professor of family medicine at Tufts University School of Medicine, said, "I think it's unconscionable for him to use his personal experience to hype a drug. The halls of medicine are littered with laetrile and other so called miracle drugs."

Professor Shaughnessy's concerns are echoed in a recent editorial in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (2004;350:2406-8), which cautioned that bevacizumab is a "non-curative" treatment that comes with a \$42 800 (£22 300; €31 500) price tag and poses its own serious health risks.

Some groups are calling for more restrictions on former politicians who become lobbyists. But Sheldon Krinsky, author of the book *Science in the Private Interest*, says that the problem of legislation favoring the drug industry won't be resolved until the industry is prohibited from contributing to political campaigns. "That's where the quid pro quo exists, and it has to be dealt with at that level," he said.