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Submission to
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee
Inquiry into the Office of the Chief Scientist

This is based on my personal opinions only, it is not intended to represent the views of my employer.

This inquiry should open the subject of guidelines for management of conflicts of interest, to apply to those who are elected, or appointed, to spend the public's money. The public needs a modern approach to the concept of accountability, since the old "rules" are no longer usable. Persons may have been as good as their words, two generations ago, but actions are what really count, since words are used to corrupt the political process, so flagrantly.

The Australian Government should acknowledge, and then build on, the work of the UK's Nolan Committee. Nolan's Seven Principles of Public Practice are a simple, but elegantly complete, expression of the bedrock of good public governance. There is no need for any of the other Anglophone nations to try to come up with something different. We should accept them as they are, and move on to the difficult spadework.

We could take note of the agencies and institutions that have applied the Nolan Principles. They, of course, will all be elsewhere, since Australians seem to be so slow at picking up the obvious. The Victorian Government did commence an inquiry into corporate governance in the public sector, but it was abandoned at the end of the previous Parliament.

A necessary corollary of NP1 is the open disclosure of financial interests. A good example can be seen in the register of members' interests, at the website of the Human Genetics Commission. (<http://www.hgc.gov.uk>) It goes without saying that such open disclosure would shock the old boys networks of Oz to their privileged roots.

Since the resignation of Marcia Angell from the New England Journal of Medicine, leading journals and institutions have addressed the problem of conflicts of interests in biomedical research. I could supply references, if you are so far behind the party as to need to ask for them.

In practice, while the codes should embody all the principles, they need to be backed up with statutes that contain clauses for enforceable penalties. But this creates another dilemma. How to audit the performance of agencies and committees, for their adherence to good public governance? Every honest person who sits around a committee table must have the assurance their reputations will be enhanced, and not suffer the risk of guilt by association with rorters. There must be a real expectation that the liars and crooks will feel the grip of public guardians on their collars. Committees that don't have that assurance will not perform well, will not attract good scientists, will oversee shoddy work, and Australian science will suffer. We may attract overseas money that hopes for a quick return on the cheap, but that is a dead-end street. Inovators, no matter where they are in the world, should know that they have as good a chance of getting support by our scientists, on their scientific merits, and not have doors shut in their faces because of opaque relationships between industry, regulators, government ministers and appointed agents. Honesty, openness, transparency, etc, must start at the top.

If Professor Jim Bloggs is going to be the main conduit for the flow of billions of dollars of taxpayers cash, he needs to take an oath and declare the private entanglements of himself and every one of his immediate family. Hat swapping is not an alternative, no matter how useful he may be to the government of the day.

In conclusion, I suggest you explore the concept of "citizens councils" with the powers of the grand jury system of the USA, for giving public governance a release from the choke-hold of politics. The probity of the statements that public officials make about themselves and their affairs needs to be tested in the public arena.