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Senator questions doctors' ties to drug companies

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AUSTIN – An influential U.S. senator is investigating the drug company connections of two renowned psychiatrists linked to the University of Texas System.

In a letter to the UT chancellor's office, Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley said the two researchers, both of whom have received federal grants, have failed to report tens of thousands of dollars in income they received from drug companies. The university is required to keep records of such income on file.

Dr. Augustus John Rush, a former researcher at UT-Southwestern in Dallas, and Dr. Karen Wagner, who works at the University of Texas Medical Branch, are the latest doctors to fall under federal scrutiny in a brewing national debate over the influence big pharmaceutical companies can wield over medical research.

"Taxpayers spend billions each year on prescription medicines through Medicare and Medicaid and through medical research," Mr. Grassley, of Iowa, said last week. "They have a right to know about financial relationships."

Both researchers, who are recognized for their contributions to child pharmacology, declined to comment for this report. University officials said they are looking into allegations the professors or their respective campuses broke reporting rules, violations that could lead to the suspension of federal grant funds.

"At this point, there could be several benevolent reasons for the alleged discrepancies," said Barry Burgdorf, vice chancellor and general counsel for the UT System. "We trust our faculty to provide complete and accurate information. We'll look into it and see what we discover."

According to Mr. Grassley's research, Dr. Wagner, who is on the faculty at UTMB in Galveston, was paid more than \$160,000 from GlaxoSmithKline between 2000 and 2005, though she reported just \$600 to the university. In 2000 and 2001, she worked on a major study on the company's drug Paxil – research that has been widely criticized for over-promoting positive findings while downplaying heightened suicidal thoughts and behavior in adolescents.

While a psychiatrist at UT-Southwestern, Dr. Rush disclosed \$3,000 in payments from Eli Lilly in 2001, a year the company reported paying him nearly \$18,000, according to records obtained by Mr. Grassley. Two years later, Dr. Rush received a federal grant to run a clinical training program related to medical ethics.

Between 2000 and 2007, Dr. Rush failed to report another \$12,000 from various drug companies, the records show.

Dr. Rush – who is now working at Duke University's medical school in Singapore – and Dr. Wagner were both contributors to the Texas Medication Algorithm Project, a controversial state drug protocol that has been trailed by allegations that drug companies improperly influenced its designers. It is currently the subject of a state lawsuit.

The National Institutes of Health require universities to keep complete financial disclosures for every researcher operating with a federal grant – and only once their outside income exceeds \$10,000. But record-keeping is poor on all sides, Mr. Grassley said: Universities often neglect to ask for them. Faculty members frequently fail to offer them up. And the federal government hasn't asked enough tough questions about whether drug companies are influencing researchers' work.

Even when this money is reported, it's hard to verify the information. Most states, including Texas, don't require drug companies to reveal their payments.

Mr. Grassley has taken these discrepancies into his own hands, demanding records from drug companies and comparing them to researchers' university filings. In the last year, he has revealed three Harvard psychiatrists failed to report a combined \$3 million in income from pharmaceutical companies, and he is looking into research disclosures at 20 universities, including UT.

In response to Mr. Grassley's review, the NIH has tightened their monitoring of researchers' drug company income – and could threaten suspension or removal of funds to doctors who haven't properly reported.

"The simple threat of losing prestigious and sizable NIH grants should send a ripple through the system," he said.

Last week, Mr. Grassley came down on Dr. Rush and Dr. Wagner, obtaining records from drug companies that he said showed the doctors hadn't properly reported all their income.

Mr. Grassley's letter said Dr. Wagner, who has led NIH-funded studies involving Eli Lilly's drug Prozac, also failed to report \$11,000 in income from that drug company in 2002.

UTMB guidelines didn't require researchers to report outside income until 2002. But starting in 1995, the NIH required universities whose researchers received federal grants to keep their financial disclosures on file, Mr. Grassley said.

Dr. Wagner did not respond to multiple phone messages or e-mails. A man who answered the phone at her home said she was not available for comment.

In her published papers, Dr. Wagner indicates she has received research funding from 11 drug companies and has been a consultant or advisory board member for 17 different manufacturers.

Dr. Rush could not be reached for comment, and a spokesman at Duke said he was "not available at this point in time." His research studies list financial relationships with more than 20 pharmaceutical companies.

Dr. Rush "filed his annual statement of financial interest as required by our policy and provided updated periodic statements as well," said John Walls, a spokesman with UT-Southwestern. "Dr. Rush was a member in good standing of our faculty, and we have no reason to doubt the information he provided in completing his disclosures."