

# Toronto pulls job offer from Prozac critic

**Philip Fine**  
MONTREAL

The University of Toronto has retracted a job offer to a British researcher who publicly suggested that Prozac could lead to suicide.

Prozac manufacturer Eli Lilly is among the pharmaceuticals companies that help finance the university's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, a mainly publicly funded psychiatric institution.

The centre accepts that the decision was made immediately after University of Wales psychopharmacologist David Healy delivered a talk at the university, but assured critics that it was not influenced by external forces.

Centre head Paul Garfinkel said he regretted that sometimes the university saw the decision to revoke the job offer as a threat to academic freedom. "We never made an offer nor rescinded an offer on the basis of any outside donor," he said.

Nevertheless, Sir David Weatherall, professor of medicine and director of the Institute of Molecular Medicine at Oxford University, said Dr Healy's case exemplified the conflict of interest that was "a symptom of the uneasy interaction between academia and industry".

Sir David, who will speak at a conference on the commercialisation of academic science at the British Academy on Wednesday, said such conflicts needed to be brought into the open.

This is not the first time that Toronto has faced controversy over commercial pressure. In 1997, blood specialist Nancy Olivieri was fired from drug trials and threatened with lawsuits by pharmaceuticals firm Apotex when she wanted to go public with results that showed a high iron build-up from Apotex's thalassaemia drug. Despite having two defamation lawsuits pending against Dr Olivieri by Apotex, the university continues to accept money from the company. "Fundraising is God here," Dr Olivieri said.

Dr Healy had his job offer withdrawn after he spoke at a mental illness colloquium at

Toronto in November. His talk, "Psychopharmacology and the government of the self", described the changes in psychiatric drugs over the past 150 years and the pitfalls in what he considers to be "corporate psychiatry".

Dr Healy has taken a special interest in selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors, the group of widely used anti-depressant drugs that includes Prozac. "I happen to believe that Prozac and other SSRIs can lead to suicide,"

Dr Healy, author of *The Anti-Depressant Era*, said during the talk — a message familiar to anyone who had followed his career. "These drugs may have been responsible for one death for every day Prozac has been on the market in North America." Dr Healy advocates more explicit warnings for SSRIs.

Toronto physician-in-chief and professor of psychiatry David Goldbloom wrote in the letter revoking the job offer that Dr Healy's "approach is incompatible with the goals for development of the academic and clinical resource that [the centre and Toronto] have". But he declined to answer questions about why Dr Healy was suddenly no longer, as the letter stated, "a good fit", saying the hiring process was confidential.

A formal offer had been made, congratulatory letter sent and salary and tasks set out. While in Toronto, Dr Healy was

asked to attend to details of interviewing a junior researcher. According to emails obtained by *The THES*, there was at no time any hint that centre heads were wary of hiring someone who has been criticised by Eli Lilly.

The Canadian Association of University Teachers asked how someone who had been offered the job could have it withdrawn so quickly. "What could have caused the centre to take this precipitous and ill-advised action?" asked Jim Turk, CAUT's executive director. Mr Turk has asked for a meeting with Toronto University president Robert Birgeneau to discuss this "affront to academic freedom". Mr Birgeneau dismissed the claim as "groundless and offensive".



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