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SPECIAL ISSUE

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Cancer Communications: The Cost

NCI Ends Brash Foray Into the News Business— Emails Tell the Story of the NCI Cancer Bulletin

This is a story about NCI spending public funds to create a publication that claimed to cover the enterprise of cancer research.

The NCI newsletter appears to have been created by former director Andrew von Eschenbach in order to blunt the coverage of the institute by this publication. The effort had no financial impact on The Cancer Letter.

This account is based on over 1,600 pages of documents spanning nearly a decade. Some of these documents are being released on [The Cancer Letter website](#).

Ideally, this story would have been written by another publication. However, no one else has the historical materials or expertise to accomplish this. To manage the author's conflict of interest, we asked Amos Gelb, associate professor at Northwestern University Medill Journalism School and president of Washington Media Institute, to edit this story.

Gelb and the author talk about the story in a video interview, [available on The Cancer Letter website](#).

By Paul Goldberg

In December 2003, after an explosion of feverish work, NCI stood on the threshold of launching a weekly newsletter that would cover the entire field of cancer research.

Other NIH institutes put out house publications, but none cover their entire areas of research. The NCI newsletter promised to serve as the gateway for information about its publisher—and to provide coverage of NIH, Congress, FDA, CDC, the pharmaceutical industry, advocacy groups, and cancer centers. In short, it would serve as the definitive publication of record.

A trail of emails and memoranda obtained by The Cancer Letter reveals that over preceding months, the institute's employees and contractors had been learning about news judgment, writing and editing.

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Letter to the Editor

"We Will Not Be Distracted From Our Mission"

This letter was signed by faculty members of the MD Anderson Cancer Center, in response to the [Jan. 18 issue](#) of The Cancer Letter.

Dear Readers of The Cancer Letter:

As senior faculty at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, we wish to respond to the article "Morale, Money Woes Hit MD Anderson," published in The Cancer Letter on Jan. 18, 2013. We do not intend to debate the inaccuracies, the specifics of the data presented or to comment on the journalistic hyperbole and innuendo woven into the article designed to convey a predetermined image of our institution.

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Von Eschenbach Wanted Bulletin To Have the Look of a Newspaper

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Features to be published, including “Meet a Researcher” and “Featured Clinical Trial,” were defined. Standard operating procedures for submissions were developed, and individuals who provide clearance were designated.

NCI staff members are not reporters, but they rose to the challenge. They held meetings, created diagrams and memoranda—and, of course, hired outside consultants. Documents obtained by The Cancer Letter include an intricate box diagram of an “operational plan” that was developed to serve as skeleton of the nascent news operation.

The publication they designed—ultimately named the NCI Cancer Bulletin—was neither the largest nor the most controversial of projects launched by then-director Andrew von Eschenbach. The history of the Bulletin—which died with a whimper after nine years of operation earlier this month—describes an idea gone amok.

The documents made public here cut a peephole into one of NCI’s most opaque operations—its \$44.9 million communications unit—enabling outsiders to observe the institute in the act of trying to blur one of the most important separations of power in American democracy: the line between the government and the press.

The Bulletin’s nine-year run also makes it possible to re-examine the hazards of unrealistic promises. The

promise von Eschenbach made to the world in 2003 was as ambitious as it gets: he would reduce cancer to a chronic disease within 12 years, by 2015. Trapped by his own goal, von Eschenbach launched gigantic projects intended to make miracles possible. Since scientific advisory boards would have urged humility and fiscal restraint, they were often not consulted on key matters.

No scientific advisory board was asked whether a venture into the news business would advance NCI’s communications agenda. But then again, advisors weren’t asked to weigh in on much larger projects of the von Eschenbach era, most notably the bioinformatics venture caBIG, which spent around \$350 million to produce tools that users said were buggy and, for the most part, not useful (The Cancer Letter, [March 18, 2011](#)).

Many of these projects have since been discredited and discarded by the current NCI director, Harold Varmus.

“The More it Looks Like a Newspaper...”

NCI spends more on communications than any NIH institute. This may be changing, as the NCI Office of Communications and Education, which spent \$44.9 million last year, is getting scrutinized by the National Cancer Advisory Board (The Cancer Letter, [Dec. 7, 2012](#))

By way of comparison, FDA’s Office of External Affairs, which supports the entire agency, has an annual budget of less than \$12 million. Its Center for Drug Evaluation and Research’s Office of Communications has a budget just over \$13 million. These figures include both salaries and operations.

These two FDA offices are responsible for covering a wide range of activities, including consumer education, consumer and health care professional outreach, website and social media services, internal communications, and drug safety announcements, as well as PR for all therapeutic areas—including food and tobacco, not just cancer. Von Eschenbach couldn’t be precluded from launching any project he wanted, and the Bulletin was one of them.

An email exchange dated Dec. 30, 2003, provides insight into his thinking about the venture.

A week before the Bulletin’s launch, the committees that had been designing the newsletter over the preceding three months had to confront a thorny question that, alas, also exposed their lack of understanding of the fundamentals of their new craft, journalism, trying to determine how much of the front page should be devoted to von Eschenbach himself.

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LETTER

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The inaugural issue of Von Eschenbach's official publication:



NCI Cancer Bulletin

Eliminating the Suffering and Death Due to Cancer

January 6, 2004
Volume 1 | Number 1

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NCI Budget Outlook for 2004

The National Cancer Institute's (NCI) funding has increased by 80 percent since 1998, while the budget for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has doubled. This historic resource growth permitted a re-energizing of the entire biomedical research enterprise in unprecedented ways. The unprecedented growth in biomedical research provides an opportunity for exponential progress. This has allowed the director of NCI to issue a challenge: eliminate the suffering and death due to cancer by 2015. But as NCI continues its operations into fiscal year 2004, it does so without a clear picture of what resources will be available.

Presently, NCI and all of NIH operate

under a continuing resolution (CR) that expires January 31, 2004. Congress included appropriations for the Department of Health and Human Services in an omnibus spending bill, which the House approved. The Senate is expected to vote on it January 20, 2004. (See more on page 5.) If the omnibus bill is not enacted, NCI may work under the CR further into 2004.

The CR provides NCI \$4.592 billion, the same level as in 2003. The omnibus bill, if enacted, would include the level requested by the president, which is \$4.771 billion, or a 3.9 percent increase of \$178 million. However, the bill includes two rescissions that would reduce the *(continued on page 2)*

Setting a New Path for Cancer Research

On December 23, 2003, the cancer research field marked the 32nd anniversary of the start of our Nation's war on cancer. On that date in 1971, President Nixon signed the National Cancer Act into law. We knew little at the time about the biology of cancer and had few tools to effectively prevent or treat the disease, but this law committed our will and resources to the goal of eliminating cancer and entrusted leadership of this effort to the National Cancer Institute (NCI). The age of molecular biology was dawning, enabling scientists to gain greater insights into the fundamental processes of both normal and cancerous cells. And the challenge to eliminate cancer inspired many of our Nation's best and

brightest to devote their energy and talent to eliminating the disease. Over three decades we have made great progress.



The union of talent, scientific discovery, and advanced technology continues to expand our knowledge of

the factors that increase cancer risk and of the processes within the cell that are disrupted in cancer's onset and progression. Our understanding of the molecular *(continued on page 2)*

Director's Update



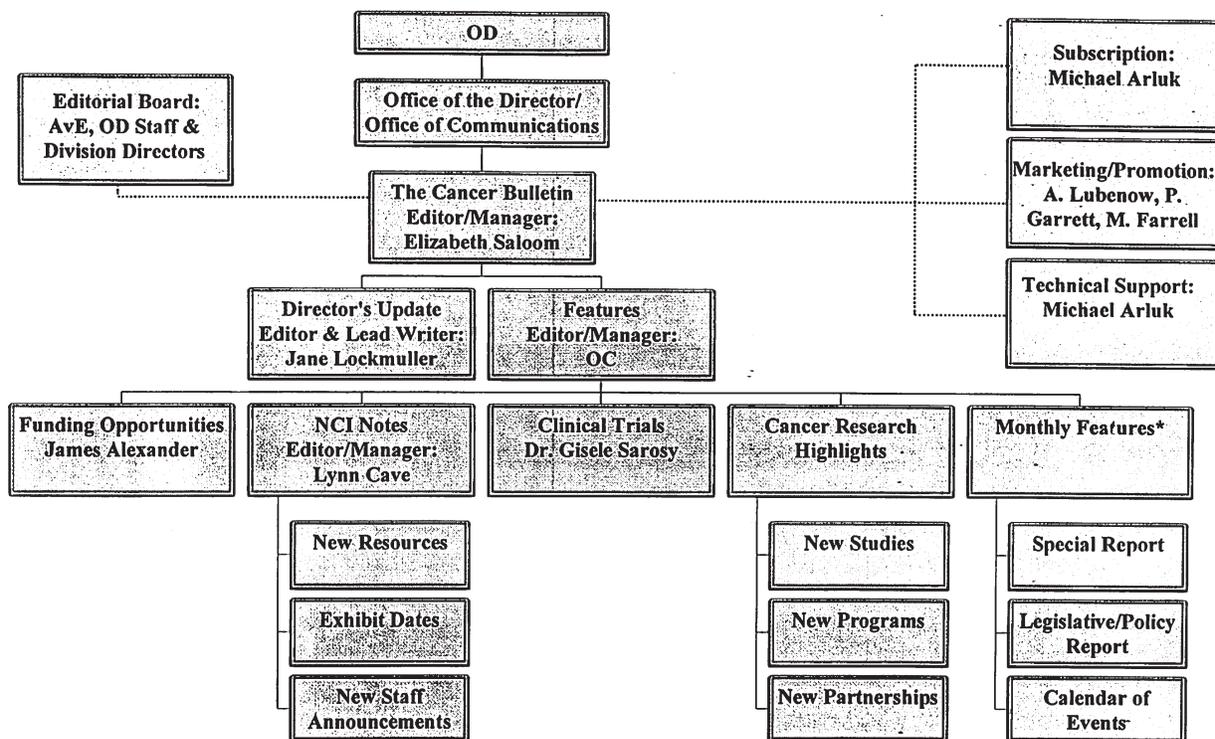
A Publication of the
National Cancer Institute
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
AND HUMAN SERVICES
National Institutes of Health

<http://cancer.gov>

1 | NCI Cancer Bulletin

How news flows through NCI:

Operational Plan: The Cancer Bulletin



Somebody had to ask von Eschenbach—the man identified in emails as “AvE” or “the boss”—whether he intended to keep the entire front page to himself. In other words, would he be willing to share the cover with *news*? In an earlier mock-up, von Eschenbach’s Director’s Update column (ghost-written with input from a 16-member “Director’s Corner Editorial Board”) took up the entire front page.

“In addition to featuring the Director’s Update on the front page of the Bulletin, we also would like to propose including a ‘News’ feature,” Mary Anne Bright, then-director of the Cancer Information Service program, suggested to von Eschenbach in an email. “I think that our readership will be interested in news from the Institute and placement on the first page would likely spur their interest.”

Von Eschenbach responded almost instantly:

“Great idea to split the front page. The more it looks like a newspaper with headlines and feature titles above the fold the more pickup it up interest it will have. No hesitation about reducing the director’s update to

accommodate [sic.] the layout. Look forward to fax, but go for it. Thanks for all the effort. I think it’s going to be fabulous!! Andy.”

It appears that von Eschenbach was unaware of a key element of the culture of journalism. With the possible exception of obituaries, no credible newspaper would run a photo of its editor or publisher on the front page. A front-page column and a photo would be unthinkable. The Bulletin’s battle for credibility would be lost from get-go.

Yet, the publication went on, burning through millions of dollars while caught in a permanent identity crisis, and seeking to foster the illusion of credibility.

A tally of emails and memoranda shows that in the run-up to the Bulletin’s launch, 77 people—employees and contractors—had some degree of involvement in the project. The cost measured in their wages and distraction from other work can never be properly tabulated.

As recently as last December, the Bulletin held editorial meetings, which occupied at least a dozen government employees for at least an hour-and-a-half.

Had the Bulletin been launched outside the government, it would have been regarded as financially mismanaged, overstaffed, laden with high costs and lacking any prospect of generating revenues.

At the time of its demise, the Bulletin employed at least four full-time equivalent employees, who, altogether, drew the salaries of \$468,080 annually. By way of comparison, the NCI media relations office, which actually interacts with the press, also has four FTE positions.

The Bulletin also used the services of contract writers who, together, were paid \$110,000 in 2012. The bills for website development services came up to \$31,440. Total cost: \$609,520.

The Bulletin had other costs.

The Spanish edition cost about \$24,000 a year, NCI officials say. Some additional staff members—including two videographers—were involved part-time. “Their specific support in the area of video production constituted only a small part of their overall assigned duties at NCI,” institute officials said.

Assuming this level of spending over nine years—a conservative assumption—had the money spent on the Bulletin been redirected, it could have provided direct support for 18 years’ worth of R01 grants. It’s unclear whether this money can be redirected. NCI officials said Bulletin staff members have been reassigned to other jobs.

“Prospective Clearances”

Had NCI chosen to spend the \$45 million on something other than PR, it could have provided direct support for more than 110 additional R01 grants, increasing the total number of grants by about 10 percent (The Cancer Letter, [Dec. 7, 2012](#)).

Another option would be to reverse the cut the NCI cancer centers program sustained in 2011, or boost the clinical trials cooperative groups program by about 15 percent, or double Varmus’s Provocative Questions initiative.

Usually, NIH reviews press releases and printed materials—such as newsletters—published by institutes and centers. However, instead of reviewing the Bulletin, every year, NIH issued “prospective clearances,” allowing the institute to continue to blur the line between journalism and PR.

“The NCI Cancer Bulletin has requested and received from the Department initial and continued publication/clearance agreement each year since the newsletter’s first issue in 2004 to its final issue on Jan. 8, 2013,” said John Burklow, NIH associate director for

communications and public liaison. “NCI assured me that all content published in the newsletter first obtained thorough subject matter expert review and clearance from NCI divisions, offices and centers and other NCI approving officials, in accordance with the Department’s directives and clearance agreement. Any and all content that covered issues related to programs, policies and announcements of DHHS or other OpDivs were also cleared through the subject matter experts or approving officials of those agencies or offices.”

NIH had no other politically feasible way to deal with the Bulletin.

The NCI perspective wasn’t fundamentally concordant with that of NIH. Von Eschenbach was in the midst of a life-and-death struggle to “eliminate suffering and death due to cancer” by 2015. Meanwhile, NIH had no overarching goal to end suffering and death from all disease by any particular date.

Yet, since the NCI director was a presidential appointee and a Bush family friend, the NIH director was in no position to control him.

Papering over the problem with a prospective clearance was a prudent way to go.

Preferred Title: *The Cancer Bulletin*

Documents show that efforts to start the Bulletin began at the time when The Cancer Letter was aggressively scrutinizing von Eschenbach’s 2015 goal and the steps he was taking to achieve it.

To counteract this coverage, NCI created an obvious look-alike publication to advocate the pro-2015-goal, and then attempted to restrict its employees’ access to the real thing.

NCI documents illustrate how these efforts to control coverage played out behind the scenes, with institute officials seeking to craft a clone of The Cancer Letter, which at the time was in the 29th year of publication. (The Cancer Letter is a registered trademark.)

To a great extent, the Bulletin is the product of a working relationship that soured rapidly in the summer of 2003.

Before President George W. Bush appointed him to run NCI, von Eschenbach was a frequently quoted on-record source in this publication. As a urologist at MD Anderson Cancer Center, he usually weighed in on politics of prostate cancer.

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This cordial relationship continued, despite The Cancer Letter's coverage of the National Dialogue on Cancer, an effort by the American Cancer Society to form an overarching cancer agenda (The Cancer Letter Special Report, [Aug. 8, 2003](#)). Von Eschenbach was a key player in that effort.

In February 2003, as NCI director, von Eschenbach stunned the entire field of oncology by setting the goal to "eliminate suffering and death due to cancer" by 2015 (The Cancer Letter, [Feb. 13, 2003](#)).

Yet, the working relationship was still intact. In May 2003, von Eschenbach sat down for a Q&A with The Cancer Letter editors (The Cancer Letter, [May 16, 2003](#)).

As the 2015 goal story developed, this publication kept up.

Coverage included:

- Von Eschenbach's efforts to loosen the FDA criteria for approving cancer drugs (The Cancer Letter, [May 30, 2003](#)).

- His decision to give \$2 million to a key supporter of his agenda, the American Association for Cancer Research (The Cancer Letter, [June 20, 2003](#))

- His conflicts of interest—including the role of PR companies that represented tobacco—in the National Dialogue on Cancer, the organization where von Eschenbach continued to serve as a fiduciary (The Cancer Letter, [July 25, 2003](#)).

- The development of his expensive plans for maintaining biospecimens (The Cancer Letter, [Aug. 8, 2003](#), and [Dec. 12, 2003](#)).

- His plan to switch existing tissue banks from grant to contract funding, a move that would have given NCI control over immensely valuable resources (The Cancer Letter, [Nov. 21, 2003](#)).

- His behavior, which included asking an official NCI scientific advisory board to pray for him during a meeting (The Cancer Letter, [May 19, 2006](#)).

NCI had a multi-year institutional subscription to The Cancer Letter, and according to the institute's usage statistics, 600 people had signed up to receive it.

An oncology nurse at the institute came up with a nickname for The Cancer Letter: "Radio Free Cancer."

Covering NCI during the von Eschenbach era was akin to covering Beijing or Moscow. Sources had to be contacted exclusively at their private cell phones or at their home numbers, manila envelopes with no return addresses appeared in the mailbox, and there was hate mail from true believers.

By the end of May 2003, coverage started to visibly upset von Eschenbach, who became the first and

only NCI director in nearly four decades to decline to speak with The Cancer Letter reporters.

Also, documents show that by mid-September 2003, NCI started to convene meetings to design a weekly newsletter first identified as The Cancer Bulletin. NCI's role was not mentioned in the original title.

The title was to have a capitalized definite article—as in The Cancer Letter. The color chosen for the Bulletin—red—told the story as well. The Cancer Letter's masthead is red. At the time, there was no red on the NCI website.

The Definite Article

The Bulletin's development process took less than four months—lightning-fast by government standards, but wrangling over the name continued until the final week.

On Dec. 30, 2003, a week before launch, Nelvis Castro, then acting director of the NCI Office of Communications, wrote in an email to Anne Lubenow, then one of the office's acting associate directors:

"Regarding the name... I forgot to tell you... the official title is the NCI Cancer Bulletin (we don't capitalize the t in the NCI... Also, I would like it to be in italics every time we referred to it... call me picky. :)"

Lubenow, who was assigned to make the project come together, responds: "How strongly do you feel about the 't'? We think it should be The NCI Cancer Bulletin (in italics). We're not going to fight you on it though, so whatever you want. :) Anne"

The message that filtered down to the NCI communications staff was simple:

"When we were tasked with doing the stuff for the Cancer Bulletin, it was clearly something that was supposed to emulate what was in The Cancer Letter," said a contributor to the Bulletin. "It seemed fairly obvious that there wasn't a whole lot of effort put in to say we have to make this completely distinct and look nothing like The Cancer Letter. That effort was never expended."

The motivation for starting the Bulletin was obvious, even at NCI's lower rungs.

"It was very much an act of spite," said a contributor, who spoke on condition of not being identified by name. "It certainly wasn't the result of a communications plan, and here are all the things we want to do... In the government those things can take a year or two.

"To have this done on such short notice was quite contrary to typical government processes."

Von Eschenbach didn't respond to an email from

The Cancer Letter.

“The goal of the NCI Cancer Bulletin was to provide useful, timely information about cancer research to the cancer community and to provide a platform for NCI Divisions, Offices and Centers, Cancer Centers and other researchers to communicate cancer research findings and information to the public,” NCI officials said in a statement.

“The publication’s masthead (see the “About the Bulletin” link) has been located either at the top right of the online version or in the footer of the printed version since 2004 and clearly identified the newsletter as a product of a federal agency, along with its purpose.”

“Unvarnished and Uneditorialized”

On Sept. 22, 2003, 16 members of the editorial board of the “NCI Director’s Corner” met to discuss von Eschenbach’s communications with the outside world.

This was a regular meeting, at which documents that would appear “under AvE’s signature” were roughed out, drafted and slated for release. The “corner” was exactly that, a section of the home page of the NCI website.

The boss needed a robust PR machine, and its spending kept escalating. At its peak, in fiscal 2006, NCI’s PR operations would cost taxpayers \$68.135 million.

According to the minutes, this time, the board briefly discussed recruiting someone to fill the odd-sounding job of “Director’s Update Lead Writer/Editor.” (The update in question was the column that ran in Director’s Corner.) Then conversation turned to plans for the Bulletin:

“Ms. Lubenow and Mr. Garrett expressed their concerns about the resource cost for both Director’s Corner and Cancer Bulletin. Mr. Garrett suggested finding out the percent of the FTE each position for the Director’s Corner and Cancer Bulletin would require.” Lubenow was the point person on the Bulletin, and Peter Garrett was a consultant to NCI.

High cost certainly begins to capture the essence of the problem faced by the founding fathers of the Bulletin. Other problems, which apparently weren’t noted, are even more profound: journalists and public servants are very different.

Journalists, if they are good, are contrarians. Government employees have to follow orders, or at least make an appearance of doing so. Editors make decisions based on news judgment. Bureaucrats can’t. They compose manuals and SOPs to cover every eventuality.

And so, documents were composed. Consider

something called “*The Cancer Bulletin Plan*.” The plan is dated Sept. 24, 2003. It’s thin—not quite 3.5 pages, double-spaced. The goals include:

“To provide a venue for the Director to articulate his perspective on issues relevant to the cancer community and to NCI.”

Intended audiences would be exactly the same as the readership of this publication.

The “Operational Considerations” section contained five bullets:

- “Newsletter will require significant resources”
- “Editor in Chief”
- “Executive Editor”
- “Production Manager”
- “There will need to be a design team that is established upfront to design the ‘look and feel’ of the newsletter.”

Was there a legitimate need for NCI to jump in?

This question was addressed in another brief plan, called “News The Cancer Community Can Use.” A section bearing the title “Friendly Competition” reads:

“Because we are considering the introduction of an electronic ‘just in time’ newsletter, we took a look at existing providers of this type of information. We found a variety of different approaches, but none that provided the type of unvarnished, uneditorialized information about NCI and its programs that is needed.”

The plan suggests a vision for obviating independent news coverage altogether:

“The potential impact of creating an information flow to and from NCI is both positive and large. By better serving its audiences with up to date, accurate information, NCI will create a more cohesive cancer community in which advances can be made more quickly.”

Like many of the von Eschenbach-era no-expense-too-high programs, the Bulletin relied heavily on contractors. These outside groups, known colloquially as the Beltway Bandits, many of whom were already employed in the NCI operations, were asked to provide design, writing and editing.

Some key players in the institute’s PR operation planned to outsource the publication entirely.

“We are having a conference with MMG [Matthews

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Media Group] tomorrow... to discuss support from them and SAIC," Castro wrote in an email Dec. 18, 2003.

"Their new science writer will be available to help us with the writing and they are trying to get a couple of people from SAIC to help too. In addition, the head of their editorial group will be available to work with us in the coordination of everything that will go in the first and future issues.

"These measures are temporary as we are in the process of writing the justification to outsource the writing and production of the newsletter."

Graphic designers seemed to be striving for a less stodgy look.

"I came up with an idea that may solve our problems," Marcos Ballestro, an NCI staff member, wrote in an email Nov. 5, 2003. "In the header we should use an inspirational 'warm and fuzzy' people images similar to the one of the children used on the Cancer budget report cover and then in the Director's Corner area we can reuse the photo mantages [sic.] that we already currently use for that page on Cancer.gov. These images are more scientific and research-oriented and would contract the more emotional image in the header."

Indeed, a photo of an elderly African American gentleman and a child, presumably his grandson, appears in a mock-up of the first edition. There is a tender smile on the man's face. In the actual first edition, the warm fuzzy image was that of Andrew von Eschenbach.

His email, broadcast to all the lists NCI could put together, was heavier on adjectives than most newspaper copy:

"I am pleased to begin the new year by announcing the launch of the *NCI Cancer Bulletin*. This new, weekly publication will provide the most useful and authoritative news concerning important NCI programs and initiatives."

"The Boss is Very Impressed"

Figuring out what to write and how to do it was a challenge for NCI staff.

In November 2003, in an e-mail conversation with another NCI staff member, Susan Erickson, head of the institute's legislative office, asked for guidance on covering regulations.

The contractor Garrett jumped in to help:

"I spoke with Susan, and directed her to FDA website," Garrett wrote in an email Nov. 19, 2003. "She is also looking at the Blue Sheet for what gets

reported and how."

The Blue Sheet was an old-time, now defunct, newsletter that covered healthcare issues in Washington. It did a yeomanly job, but it was no New Yorker.

Von Eschenbach personally played a role in selecting stories.

On Dec. 3, 2003, NCI Chief of Staff Dorothy Foellmer banged out this email on her BlackBerry:

"Dr. Von E. would like the bulletin to highlight the successes of the intramural program. We are at the NCAB listening to [Director of the NCI Center for Cancer Research] Carl Barrett's presentation and the boss is very impressed. Even just looking at the list of collaborators (CRADA partners, etc.) is very impressive.

"Can this be teed up for the first issue or second issue?"

Perhaps it made sense that, after creating the Bulletin, von Eschenbach would expect to play a role in deciding which stories would get covered, and this would have been just fine if the Bulletin had been designed as a PR organ.

The concept of balance in journalism means fairness, which usually means giving everyone an opportunity to respond. At the Bulletin, it meant something else: mandating that all NCI divisions be featured in all issues. Production of the von Eschenbach mouthpiece entailed a production quota for the divisions.

"To provide a balanced and comprehensive view of NCI, we would like for each NCI Division to be covered in every issue in one or more of the Bulletin's sections," wrote Lynn Cave, then an NCI press office staff member, in an email to divisions. "Please let us know who you will be naming from your Division as the Cancer Bulletin main contact."

The Bulletin's first issue was so strikingly similar to The Cancer Letter that Science ran a photo of their two issues next to each other in its [Random Samples column](#).

At the time, both publications were in PDF format, both were eight pages long, both came out weekly, and both featured red mastheads. There was one obvious difference: the Bulletin was published at taxpayers' expense and, of course, there was the photo of von Eschenbach on the cover.

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The Peril of Self-Covering

By being both a publisher and a public health organization, NCI was in the unique and ethically questionable position to give itself scoops.

For example, on April 6, 2004, the Bulletin reported that the members of the data and safety monitoring board of a major NCI-sponsored trial—the National Lung Screening Trial—had resigned.

The board members walked off, citing the government’s failure to give them protection from lawsuits that may arise in connection with the trial.

The Bulletin got the scoop because it was part of NCI and because—for some reason—the institute wanted to make the disclosure. This was a questionable decision, because responsible news organizations don’t report on proceedings of DSMBs. This is done out of respect for patients who enroll in such trials. News outlets avoid reporting such matters, in the same way that they don’t report the names of rape victims or covert CIA operatives.

More importantly, institutions that sponsor clinical trials avoid discussion of events stemming from operations of the DSMBs, fearing—correctly—that the public would perceive controversies on these boards as signs of problems with the data or safety. In the case of NLST, which enrolled people at high risk of cancer, who didn’t have diagnosed disease, this disclosure was

particularly perilous.

The decision to cover this walkout in the Bulletin was irresponsible, experts in the proceedings of DSMBs said to The Cancer Letter at the time (The Cancer Letter, [April 16, 2004](#)).

“The proceedings of data and safety monitoring boards are confidential, and the release of any part of those proceedings can be accomplished through a vote of the board, designating the audience to which this information would be provided,” said Grace Monaco, a veteran of many DSMBs, to The Cancer Letter at the time. “If NCI stated that the board took a walk for a specific reason, that puts other boards on notice, which could have a chilling effect on the work of other boards. It parlays a manageable problem into a major impediment to NIH committee activity, and may jeopardize trials.”

The Cancer Letter asked then NCI Chief of Staff Dorothy Foellmer whether she thought the disclosure had the potential to hurt the controversial trial that enrolled 50,000 current and former smokers.

“I don’t know,” Foellmer said to The Cancer Letter at the time. “I haven’t had those conversations.”

The Bulletin’s ill-advised disclosure notwithstanding, the trial went on—and turned out positive.

In 2005, the Bush administration redeployed von

NCI purchased e-mail lists to promote the Bulletin:

NCI Cancer Bulletin				
Email List Rentals Years 1-3				
16-Nov-12				
FOIA # 40569				
Billing Date	Item Name	Vendor Name	Billing Price	Notes
9/18/2009	Email list rental— <i>Bioscience</i> magazine	Statistics	\$1,850.00	
9/29/2009	Email list rental—Cambridge Healthtech Institute	Cambridge Healthtech Institute	\$5,500.00	
9/29/2009	Email list rental—OncologyWeekly newsletter	Canon Pharma Group, LLC	\$1,395.00	
9/29/2009	Email list rental—American Medical Association	SDI Health LLC	\$4,642.67	
9/29/2009	Email list rental— <i>The Scientist</i> magazine	The Scientist	\$600.00	
	2009 Total		\$13,987.67	
1/11/2010	Email list rental—Oncology Nursing Society	ONS	\$5,884.26	
4/12/2010	Email list rental—Advanstar publications	Statistics	\$7,823.79	
4/13/2010	Email list rental—SK&A Information Services	SK&A Information Services, Inc.	\$2,776.90	
4/13/2010	Email list rental—SK&A Information Services	SK&A Information Services, Inc.	\$6,117.02	
6/8/2010	Email list rental— <i>Biotechniques</i> magazine	IBC USA Conferences Inc.	\$3,568.00	
6/14/2010	Email list rental—SK&A Information Services	SK&A Information Services, Inc.	\$4,146.00	
8/2/2010	Email list rental—American Academy of Physician Assistants and	Infocus Marketing	\$8,542.38	
8/30/2010	Email list rental— <i>Nature</i> journal	MacMillan Publishers LTD.	\$2,792.00	
9/23/2010	Email list rental—TheOncologyNurse.com	Green Hill Healthcare Communica	\$10,717.00	
9/29/2010	Email list rental— <i>Advance Oncologists</i> magazine	Merion (DBA Advance Web)	\$734.25	
10/19/2010	Email list rental—American Academy of Physician Assistants	Infocus Marketing	\$1,575.00	
10/27/2010	Email list rental—AARP’s Orlando@ 50+ National Event and Expo	Experient	\$2,084.23	
11/30/2010	Email list rental—SK&A Information Services	SK&A Information Services, Inc.	\$5,457.30	
	2010 Total		\$62,218.13	
3/25/2011	Email list rental— <i>BioScience Technology</i> magazine	The Biotech Communication Group	\$9,787.12	
	2011 Total		\$9,787.12	

Eschenbach to the top job at FDA. For several months, he entertained the idea of running both NCI and FDA while also remaining a fiduciary of C-Change, the new name of the National Dialogue on Cancer. This career plan presented a dizzying array of conflicts.

At the end of 2005, NCI got a chance to restrict its staff's access to The Cancer Letter. The institute struck when its multi-year institutional subscription to this publication came up for renewal. The contract wasn't renewed.

The cancellation was prompted by desire to save money, an institute spokesman [told The Washington Post at the time](#). This move prompted most of NCI's divisions to take out institutional subscriptions, and many staff members took individual subscriptions.

The Bulletin, Post-AvE

By the time von Eschenbach departed from NCI, the Bulletin was an established program. It had staying power.

Von Eschenbach's successor, John Niederhuber, didn't require the services of an editorial board, and he had no particular use for the Bulletin. Chipping away at the institute's communications budget, he cut back the Bulletin to a two-week schedule.

"It wasn't entirely a resource issue," said a former insider. "It had to do with the value of the coverage." Niederhuber also reached out to this publication, suggesting a Q&A (The Cancer Letter, [Sept. 22, 2006](#)). "It took guts to give an interview to The Cancer Letter," said the former staff member. "He felt that he had to answer questions forthrightly and not play games with the media."

In the interview, Niederhuber said that he had been trying to trim the NCI Office of the Director.

"We have gone through the so-called Office of the Director," Niederhuber said at the time. "I think the Office of the Director is a large garbage can. Everything gets dumped into the Office of the Director over the years, and I've inherited all of these ideas and wonderful thoughts that people have had for the past couple of decades."

Yet, the Bulletin, which was a part of this legacy, continued for at least another six years.

It was difficult to decide whether it was a policy publication, a consumer publication, or a PR organ. Identity crisis notwithstanding, it expanded to include a Spanish-language edition and online video content. No outside board of experts—of the sort mentioned by Young—was consulted about wisdom of these expansions.

Whatever it was, the Bulletin was lavishly spending money on mailing lists to promote itself to a diverse set of readers. NCI records show that in 2009, the Bulletin spent \$62,218 to rent email lists, sending promotions to oncology nurses, physician assistants, statisticians, readers of the journal Nature, people who follow biotechnology, and folks who attended something called the "AARP 50+ National Event and Expo."

The Cancer Bulletin was killed earlier this month (The Cancer Letter, [Jan. 25](#)). NCI officials decided not to seek prospective clearance from NIH.

"This decision was made as part of NCI's ongoing efforts to examine how best to apportion its limited resources," the publication's editor-in-chief Jim Mathews wrote in a memo to the staff dated Jan. 11. "Staff currently assigned to the NCI Cancer Bulletin will, in the short term, continue to work and develop content while OCE leadership determines the best way to utilize their skills and experience to complement OCE's evolving role within the Institute."

It's not clear whether the Bulletin will be missed.

Robert Young, chairman of the NCI Board of Scientific Advisors when the Bulletin was started, remembers looking at the Bulletin's first issue, published Jan. 6, 2004.

"I looked at it when it first came out, and it just didn't fulfill any need that I had, and it didn't seem that anything particularly unique was being explored, and so I just stopped paying much attention to it," Young said.

Young said he remains sympathetic to the NCI goal of making itself more visible to the public. "If that was at least in part the goal, it was a reasonable goal," Young said. "But the Bulletin didn't serve that function in any successful way."

The Bulletin should have been reviewed by outside reviewers before it was launched and at various points through its existence, Young said.

"The key thing is that over and over, whenever they don't share some of these concepts with an interested, knowledgeable, but external advisory group, they get burned," he said.

"Over and over."

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Letter to the Editor

(Continued from page 1)

We do, however, think it is important for the academic community and our patients to understand that we are extremely proud of our work and the institution, as well as the leadership that facilitate these efforts. We are also proud of the fact that, as with any academic institution, we cherish and actively engage in open discussion of the challenges that we face now and will continue to face in the future. These discussions are transparent, robust and frank but do not diminish our ultimate dedication to our institution, its mission, and our respect for each other and our leadership. The transmittal and publication of these data and the discussion surrounding your analysis of these data as a reflection of the total perspective of the MD Anderson faculty is as unfortunate as it is inaccurate.

The small minority within the institution who choose not to take their concerns to us or to MD Anderson leadership, but rather go directly to external channels such as The Cancer Letter to air their grievances do not speak for the vast majority of the faculty. This is neither a productive nor effective way to address perceived issues. The complaints of a few have led to inaccurate articles that have unfairly tarnished the institution's reputation by presenting a false picture of what is actually taking place. This is an affront to all of us who have worked very hard for many years to earn our status as the nation's top cancer hospital. It selfishly instills unwarranted fear in our employees and causes unnecessary doubt in the minds of our patients, which betrays the core values to which we hold ourselves accountable.

It is our perspective as scientific, clinical and Faculty Senate leaders, as well as the perspective of many faculty working at MD Anderson, that the challenges we are facing—challenges not unique to our institution—will only serve to galvanize our efforts and contribute more aggressively to the scientific and fiscal well-being of the institution. We remain confident that our abilities as physicians, scientists and administrators will enable us to achieve the lofty goals we aim to accomplish for our patients, society as a whole and ourselves. As senior faculty we and our leaders are engaged with the faculty at every level of the institution and we remain confident that collectively we will maintain our position as a leader in generating advances in the science, treatment, and prevention of cancer.

On behalf of those who put their trust in us, we

will not be distracted from our mission to eliminate cancer.

Sincerely,

James Abbruzzese – Professor, Chair, Gastrointestinal Medical Oncology

Christian Abee – Professor, Chair, Veterinary Sciences

James Allison – Professor, Chair, Immunology

Michelle Barton – Professor, Dean, Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences UT-Houston

Robert Bast – Professor, Vice President, Translational Research

Oliver Bogler – Professor, Sr. Vice President, Academic Affairs

Thomas Buchholz – Professor, Division Head, Radiation Oncology, Chair, Radiation Oncology

Richard Champlin – Professor, Chair, Stem Cell Transplantation

Junjie Chen – Professor, Chair, Experimental Radiation Oncology

James Cox – Professor, Division Head Emeritus, Radiation Oncology

Sharon Dent – Professor, Chair, Molecular Carcinogenesis

Colin Dinney – Professor, Chair, Urology

Jean-Bernard Durand – Associate Professor, Cardiology, Chair, Faculty Senate

Thomas Feeley – Professor, Division Head, Anesthesiology and Critical Care

Robert Gagel – Professor, Division Head, Internal Medicine

Ernie Hawk – Professor, Head and Vice President for Cancer Prevention and Population Sciences

Marshall Hicks – Professor, Division Head, Diagnostic Imaging

Wan-Ki Hong – Professor, Vice Provost, Clinical Research and Division Head, Cancer Medicine

Gabriel Hortobagyi – Professor, Chair Emeritus, Breast Medical Oncology

Mien-Chie Hung – Professor, Chair, Molecular and Cellular Oncology, and Vice President, Basic Science

Patrick Hwu – Professor, Chair, Melanoma Medical Oncology and Sarcoma Medical Oncology

Raghu Kalluri – Professor, Chair, Cancer Biology

Hagop Kantarjian – Professor, Chair, Leukemia

Larry Kwak – Professor, Chair, Lymphoma/Myeloma

Christopher Logothetis – Professor, Chair, Genitourinary Medical Oncology

Guillermina Lozano – Professor, Chair, Genetics

Karen Lu – Professor, Chair, Gynecologic Oncology and Reproductive Medicine

Gordon Mills – Professor, Chair, Systems Biology

Geoffrey Robb – Professor, Chair, Plastic Surgery

Barbara Summers – Professor, Vice President, Chief Nursing Officer and Head of the Division of Nursing

Stephen Swisher – Professor, Division Head and interim, Surgery, and Chair, Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery

Peggy Tinkey – Professor, Chair, Veterinary Medicine and Surgery

Elizabeth Travis – Professor, Associate Vice President, Women Faculty Programs

Randal Weber – Professor, Chair, Head and Neck Surgery

Edward Yeh – Professor, Chair, Cardiology

W.K. Alfred Yung – Professor, Chair, Neuro-Oncology

In Brief

Sabbatini Named Deputy Physician in Chief at MSKCC

PAUL SABBATINI was named deputy physician in chief for clinical research at **Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center**.

The new position will have direct oversight of the center's Office of Clinical Research, Institutional Review Board, and various protocol review committees.

Sabbatini, a medical oncologist who focuses on gynecologic malignancies, joined Memorial Sloan-Kettering in 1994.

He has served on several committees of the Gynecologic Oncology Group and as the vice chair for the Clinical Trials Office in the Department of Medicine.

MARC TROUP GOODMAN joined **Cedars-Sinai's Samuel Oschin Comprehensive Cancer Institute** to lead an academic program in cancer prevention and genetics.

Previously, Goodman was a professor at the University of Hawaii Cancer Center, where he led research projects with a special focus on the racially diverse population in Hawaii. He has studied genetic pathways for ovarian and uterine cancers; the association of human papillomavirus with cervical, anal and oral cancers; and the link between diet and breast cancer.

At Cedars-Sinai, Goodman will continue his studies to understand how a person's genetic pathways and lifestyle intersect to affect their cancer risk.

GEORGE WEINER was elected vice president and president-elect of the **Association of American Cancer Institutes**.

Weiner is director of the Holden Comprehensive Cancer Center at the University of Iowa. He is also the C.E. Block Chair of Cancer Research, a professor of internal medicine, and a faculty member in the Interdisciplinary Graduate Program in Immunology.

Weiner will become president of the AACI in the fall of 2014.

He served as a member of the board of directors from 2004-2007 and currently chairs the AACI New Initiative committee.

In a statement submitted to AACI members prior to the election, Weiner said he would focus his presidency on "the academic difference," referencing the role academic cancer centers play in patient care and research.

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