

Tentative beliefs are the best kind
by Lloyd Robertson

Dr. Nancy Olivieri was contracted to head the research into a drug being developed by the Apotex Corporation. The drug was designed to fight thalassaemia in children. Since the doctor was a specialist in this field with Toronto's Sick Children's Hospital, she had the credentials and the prestige to gain quick acceptance by Canada's drug regulators and the medical community.

In the course of her research Dr. Olivieri became convinced that the drug might be toxic. She was fired when she voiced her concerns on the grounds that "she no longer believed in the drug". The company began a law suit against her when she published her results. Apotex insisted that she was in breach of contract, she had to have the company's permission to publish. The lawsuit was withdrawn, possibly because of the fear of a public relations problem; however, the company persisted in attempting to have her fired from her position with the Sick Children's Hospital. The company has been a donor to that hospital.

It is frightening to know that Dr. Olivieri could well have lost such a lawsuit. Under our rules of capitalism, research done on company time belongs to the company. A company, motivated by its search for profits, will decide what to share and what not to share with the public. Had Apotex found another medical researcher, one who "believed in" the drug and found evidence to support that belief then those results could have been published while Dr. Olivieri's remained buried. We could have been saddled with a toxic, poorly researched drug on the market.

"Belief in" something, regardless of the evidence, is faith. Apotex fired Olivieri because she lost her faith in their product. The company wanted her to be a "true believer" in their product and to find evidence to support that belief. The company was guilty of religious thinking.

Apotex officials failed to realize that no scientist can have faith in any product and still be scientific. A scientist may believe something but they cannot afford to "believe in" what they are supposed to be studying. Put another way, scientific belief is tentative. A belief is held only until sufficient evidence contradicting that belief accumulates.

Psychologically, if we have "faith" then we will see evidence in support of that faith where none really exists. We will also discount or even not see evidence that contradicts that belief. Hence, many tobacco company executives were sincere in saying, up until a few years ago, that there was no scientific evidence linking tobacco with cancer. Their "faith" or "belief in" their product kept them from recognizing the scientific evidence as "good science". Since Dr. Olivieri never "believed in" the drug she was contracted to study, she was able to see evidence of its toxicity. This may have saved lives,

We can all benefit from becoming more scientific in our approach to life. If we are tentative in our beliefs about another person then we are more likely to listen to that person with an open mind. Our relationships become less "toxic". If we refuse to "believe in" the company we work for then we are more open to seeing ways that the company can be improved. In the long run the company along with ourselves may benefit. If we refuse to have faith in our belief system then that belief system becomes open to positive change benefitting everyone around us.

Only by making our beliefs tentative can we engage in a search for truth. Altho the truth may, at times, not be what I would like, it is still better than falsehood. The truth shall make you free.