

Academics linked to drug industry 'exaggerated' swine flu risk

New research published in the *BMJ* has suggested that academics with links to the pharmaceutical industry were more likely to give increased risk assessments of the swine flu pandemic of 2009/10 when talking to the media, compared with academics who were not linked to the pharmaceutical industry.

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Swine flu is a highly contagious respiratory disease found in pigs. The **H1N1 influenza** subtype is the type that has been known to infect humans, with outbreaks occurring worldwide throughout 2009 and 2010.

Earlier this year, *Medical News Today* reported on research led by the World Health Organization (WHO), stating that the swine flu pandemic is thought to have **infected 1 in every 5 people worldwide**.

In terms of cost, the researchers say that during the pandemic in the UK, there was an estimated £1 billion (\$1.6 billion) spent on pharmaceuticals, such as antiviral drugs and the **H1N1** vaccine. They add that the pharmaceutical industry made between £4.5 and £6.5 billion (\$7.2 and \$10.4 billion) profit on the H1N1 vaccine alone.

The researchers say that from these hefty numbers, there were concerns raised regarding "competing interests" that experts on "influential scientific advisory committees" may have had with drug companies.

Analysis of newspapers and tabloids

To determine whether competing interests were at play, the researchers analyzed UK newspaper print coverage of the swine flu pandemic between April and July 2009. They note that this was the time period when major decisions were being made regarding the best way to respond to the outbreak.

The analysis included a variety of 425 articles from newspapers and tabloids in order to gain a strong range of reporting styles and perspectives. Broadcast media was excluded, as the researchers believed print publications would provide more in-depth viewpoints.

All articles were analyzed for the sources quoted, how these sources assessed the risk of swine flu to the population, and the promotion or rejection of swine flu drugs and vaccines.

The team then looked to uncover the competing interests of each named academic who was quoted. This was done through the use of conflict of interest statements, funding sources that were detailed on social profile pages, web searches and the analysis of funding declarations on all publications 4 years previously.

The researchers deemed the following as competing interests:

- Paid advisory or consultancy roles
- Directorship or stock in companies specializing in antiviral products
- Research grants or commercial work funded by pharmaceutical companies.

'Risk assessments higher' in academics with competing interests

From the analysis, it was found that health ministers were the most common source, quoted on 34% of the articles regarding swine flu. This was closely followed by academics, at 30%.

Of the 61 academics who were quoted, 18 (30%) were found to have competing interests.

The academics made 74 risk assessments in the articles. Of these, almost 60% were higher than risk assessments made by official agencies, such as the Department of Health, within the same article.

The analysis revealed that 35 of these academic risk assessments were made by individuals with competing interests.

The researchers explain that this means the academic risk assessments from those with competing interests were nearly six times as likely to be higher, compared with risk assessments from academics who had no links.

Antiviral drugs and the H1N1 vaccine was commented on specifically in 36 articles by 20 academics. The researchers found that around 50% of these academics had competing interests.

It was found that academics who promoted the use of antiviral drugs in the articles were eight times more likely to have competing interests, compared with those who did not comment on the use of antiviral drugs.

Furthermore, the researchers found that only three of the 425 articles clearly mentioned that the sources have competing interests.

Public confidence in academics 'could be degraded'

The research team notes that interviews with these academics may "have contained more nuance views" than what appeared in print and the journalists may have deliberately sought more newsworthy views.

However, they say that academics are a highly trusted source for journalists and are in a "unique and powerful" position during public health threats, meaning many people will follow their recommendations.

The researchers add that undisclosed competing interests could damage public confidence:

"Our results provide some evidence that the provision of higher risk assessments and the promotion of [antiviral drugs] are associated with [competing interests] among academics."

"These add to the growing body of literature highlighting the potential influence of the pharmaceutical industry on policy decisions through multiple avenues, including advisory committees, drafting of guidelines, and media commentary.

Undisclosed [competing interests] degrades public confidence in medical research, to the detriment of the whole scientific community. Academics should declare, and journalists report, relevant [competing interests] for media interviews."

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