

Scandal of experts who rule on NHS statins but get paid by drugs firms

MOST of the experts who are set to recommend the widespread use of statins next month are in the pay of the drug companies that manufacture them.



Dr Anthony Wierzbicki: Chairman of statin panel has links to drug firms including Pfizer [COLLECT]

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The specialists sit on the Government health watchdog, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (Nice).

Nice is expected to issue new national advice saying statins, now prescribed to about seven million people a year, should be offered to at least one in four adults.

The move has been criticised by many doctors who say that for many low-risk patients the benefits of statins do not outweigh possible side effects including diabetes, impotence, cataracts, muscle pains, mental impairment, fatigue and liver dysfunction.

A Sunday Express investigation has discovered eight out of 12 members of the Nice panel which drew up the guidance have financial ties to companies that make statins or next generation cholesterol

lowering drugs.

The financial ties are declared in an appendix to the new draft Nice statin guidance and include payments for speeches, lectures or to attend conferences which can reap thousands of pounds per hour.

It also includes salaries for involvement in clinical trials of new statin-style drugs, which can amount to tens of thousands of pounds a year, payment for drug company advisory roles, and in one case a sponsorship of a work post.

Tory MP Dr Sarah Wollaston has vowed to call on the Commons Health Select Committee to investigate the revelation.

GP Dr Wollaston, a former member of the committee, said: "This should lead to an examination by Nice. It is a concern as this panel's decision has

such widespread implications for prescribing and cost to the NHS.”

Shadow Health Minister Andrew Gwynne said: “Patients across the country will be concerned by these findings. Any suggestion that medics or officials stand to personally profit from decisions about our care will rightly worry patients. Ministers must ask the watchdog to investigate without delay.”

Aseem Malhotra, a London-based heart doctor, said: “I am astounded that eight out of 12 members of the statin panel have direct financial ties to the drugs industry.

“I always believed Nice was completely independent of the drugs industry. We need researchers and scientists to concentrate on what is best for patients and not individual careers and profits of drug companies.”

One of the eight Nice members with financial links is Dr Anthony Wierzbicki, chairman of the statin panel and a heart disease specialist at Guys and St Thomas’s hospital in London, who is being paid by six drug giants, including Pfizer, Sanofi and Aventis, to help research new generation cholesterol lowering drugs. Dr Rajai Ahmad, a heart specialist at West Midlands Hospital, has received “speaker fees” from multinational drug companies investing in heart drugs.

Dr Michael Khan, a heart specialist at University Hospitals of Coventry and Warwickshire, has been paid by drug companies investing in heart drugs for lectures and to sit on four drug company advisory boards and is being paid by drug company Amgen to run a clinical trial.

Specialist heart nurse Sister Emma McGowan, who works at the same trust, admitted her job has been sponsored by statin manufacturers Astra Zeneca for a year. She also received a drug company payment for speaking and another for attending a conference. She declared: “The payments were made to me personally as I have been informed they are unable to pay into a departmental fund.”

Dr Robert Dermot Neely, heart specialist at the University of Newcastle, declared drug company cash for sitting on their advisory boards, working on trials into new heart drugs and for attending a conference. The Sunday Express revealed last week that leading specialists are demanding an end to the widespread use of the controversial heart drugs.

Dr Kailash Chand, deputy chairman of the British Medical Association, suffered debilitating side effects after he was prescribed statins five years ago.

Dr Chand, 60, a GP in Tameside, Greater Manchester, said: “The whole thing is corrupting. Members of the panel should be whiter than white and not in the pay of drug companies.”

Dr Malcolm Kendrick, who has studied heart health, added: “Nice is the judiciary for drugs. No one who has a financial conflict of interest should be involved. It must be stopped.”

A spokesman for Nice said: “The conflicts of interest declared by committee members involved in producing this guideline have been managed appropriately. They have not influenced in any way the draft recommendations on the use of statins.”