

Intended for healthcare professionals

Editorials

Conflicts of interest and pandemic flu

BMJ 2010; 340 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.c2947> (Published 04 June 2010) Cite this as: BMJ 2010;340:c2947

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Fiona Godlee, editor in chief

[Author affiliations](#)

fgodlee@bmj.com

WHO must act now to restore its credibility, and Europe should legislate

The world should of course be thankful that the 2009 influenza A/H1N1 pandemic proved such a damp squib. With so many fewer lives lost than had been predicted, it almost seems ungrateful to carp about the cost. But carp we must because the cost has been huge. Some countries—notably Poland—declined to join the panic buying of vaccines and antivirals triggered when the World Health Organization declared the pandemic a year ago this week. However, countries like France and the United Kingdom who have stockpiled drugs and vaccines are now busy unpicking vaccine contracts, selling unused vaccine to other countries, and sitting on huge piles of unused oseltamivir. Meanwhile drug companies have banked vast profits—\$7bn (£4.8bn; €5.7bn) to \$10bn from vaccines alone according to investment bank JP Morgan.¹ Given the scale of public cost and private profit, it would seem important to know that WHO's key decisions were free from commercial influence.

An investigation by the *BMJ* and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, published this week (doi:10.1136/bmj.c2912), finds that this was far from the case.² As reported by Deborah Cohen and Philip Carter, some of the experts advising WHO on the pandemic had declarable financial ties with drug companies that were producing antivirals and influenza vaccines. As an example, WHO's guidance on the use of antivirals in a pandemic was authored by an influenza expert who at the same time was receiving payments from Roche, the manufacturer of oseltamivir (Tamiflu), for consultancy work and lecturing. Although most of the experts consulted by WHO made no secret of their industry ties ...

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