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OPEN LETTER

Royal colleges must be more transparent on payments from industry

This open letter signed by Kamran Abbasi, editor in chief, *The BMJ*, urges the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges and its members to be more transparent on disclosing payments they receive from industry and patient groups.

Dear Dr Jeanette Dickson,

We are writing to you to call for a transparent and standardised system under which royal medical colleges in the UK, responsible for doctors' education and training, declare the money that they receive from industry and patient organisations.

In July, *The BMJ* published an investigation which revealed that royal colleges received more than £9m in payments from drug and medical devices companies since 2015.¹ The Royal College of Physicians and the Royal College of General Practitioners were the biggest recipients of industry money. Pharmaceutical companies Pfizer and Novo Nordisk, and medical device companies Johnson and Johnson Medical and Thermo Fisher Scientific, were the biggest donors.

The colleges are not obliged to disclose these payments; they are not always included in their annual reports. *The BMJ* had to rely on industry databases to obtain the figures. These only offer a partial glimpse into financial flows. Data are only held for three years before being deleted, only broad categories describe what the money was given for. No disclosure databases exist for other relevant industries including food, software, data analysis, and medical equipment, or any other organisation that might interact with colleges such as a patient group.

When *The BMJ* contacted the colleges to check that the sums we calculated were correct, many had difficulties in confirming the amounts. Only one college, the Royal College of Anaesthetists, could send *The BMJ* a comprehensive list of payments from each company. Individual royal colleges are making attempts at greater transparency. The Royal College of General Practitioners has announced that it aims to publish a list of full payments by sponsors, but there is no common guidance for medical royal colleges to follow.

Doctors pay membership fees to royal colleges, and colleges speak on behalf of their specialty, therefore members have a right to know how much their organisation is receiving from industry. Transparency is the absolute minimum for managing conflicts of interest. In order to become more transparent, royal colleges shouldn't rely on industry transparency initiatives which many people agree don't go far enough. In the absence of legally mandated transparency, colleges should take the lead and disclose industry funding in a comprehensive and standardised manner. The Academy of Medical Royal Colleges might be tasked with the coordination of this system. Evidence shows clinicians' prescribing habits are influenced by industry marketing, which is why the College of Psychiatrists of Ireland stopped taking sponsorship from drug companies in 2012.

Greater transparency about the amount of industry funding, its nature and purpose, will lead to greater trust in the work of royal colleges. It will also allow an informed discussion, including by members and the public, about how such payments should be governed and under which conditions they should be received—if at all.

We thank you in advance for your consideration of this letter.

Yours sincerely,

Kamran Abbasi, editor in chief, *The BMJ*

¹ Boytchev H. Medical royal colleges receive millions from drug and medical devices companies. *BMJ* 2023;382. doi: 10.1136/bmj.p1658. pmid: 37495244