



The BMJ

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2023;382:p1858<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.p1858>

Royal colleges are urged to be more transparent on industry payments

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The BMJ's editor in chief has urged the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges and its members to establish a standard for transparently disclosing payments they receive from industry and patient groups.

"Transparency is the absolute minimum for managing conflicts of interest," Kamran Abbasi said in an open letter to the institutions.¹

An investigation by *The BMJ* in July found that royal colleges had received more than £9m in payments from drug and medical device companies since 2015 but that they did not always disclose these publicly.²

The colleges are not obliged to disclose these payments, which are not always included in their annual reports. To obtain the figures *The BMJ* had to rely on industry databases, Disclosure UK, a website run by the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI), and Transparent MedTech, run by MedTech Europe, the European trade association for medical device companies.

The databases offer only a partial glimpse into financial flows, however, as data are deleted after three years, and broad categories describe what the money was given for. Payments from other industries, including food, software, data analysis, and medical equipment companies, are not tracked, so it is not known whether colleges receive money from these or how much.

Last year the Royal College of General Practitioners announced that it aimed to publish a list of full payments from sponsors by 2024. However, the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, the membership body for the medical royal colleges and faculties, provides no guidance on transparency of payments.

Informed discussion

In the open letter Abbasi called 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."

He added that "royal colleges shouldn't rely on industry transparency initiatives which many people agree don't go far enough." Instead they should "take the lead and disclose industry funding in a comprehensive and standardised manner," and the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges could coordinate the effort.

Greater transparency will increase trust in the work of the royal colleges, Abbasi said. He added, "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."

The BMJ's investigation found that the biggest recipients of money from drug and device companies

from 2015 to 2022 were the Royal College of Physicians and the Royal College of GPs, which each received around £3m.

When *The BMJ* contacted colleges to check that the sums calculated were correct, many had difficulty in confirming the amounts. Only one, the Royal College of Anaesthetists, was able to send *The BMJ* a comprehensive list of payments from each company.

Emma Hardy, Labour MP and chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Surgical Mesh Implants, told *The BMJ*'s investigation, "I can see no justification for anything but full and mandatory disclosure."

Recently, the Department of Health and Social Care for England announced a public consultation on mandatory disclosure of industry payments to the healthcare sector, similar to the system the US has under the Physician Payments Sunshine Act.³

- 1 Abbasi K. Royal colleges must be more transparent on payments from industry. *BMJ* 2023;382. doi: 10.1136/bmj.p1864
- 2 Boytchev H. Medical royal colleges receive millions from drug and medical devices companies. *BMJ* 2023;382. doi: 10.1136/bmj.p1658 PMID: 37495244
- 3 Boytchev H. UK will consult on disclosure of industry payments to doctors ahead of possible legislation. *BMJ* 2023;381. doi: 10.1136/bmj.p1219 PMID: 37236641