

## NEWS

# US doctors earn speaking and consulting fees from drug companies that sponsor their research

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Medical researchers in the United States often accept thousands of dollars in speaking and consulting payments from drug companies that also sponsor their research, the investigative journalism nonprofit organization ProPublica reported on 25 March.<sup>1</sup>

In their investigation Charles Ornstein and Ryann Grochowski Jones, reporters for ProPublica, used a searchable database called Dollars for Docs, which tracks payments made to doctors by 15 drug companies.

In their analysis the reporters looked at the payments made by nine companies in the database in 2012: Allergan, Cephalon, Eli Lilly, Forest Laboratories, GlaxoSmithKline, Merck, Novartis, Pfizer, and ViiV Healthcare.

They found that about 10% of the scientists that received funding for research from these companies also received money for speaking or consulting or both.

All told, in 2012 the researchers received more than \$90m (£54m; €65m) in research grants, nearly \$13m for speaking engagements, and another \$4m for consulting, the reporters found.

Of the companies they looked at, Pfizer had the lowest rate of dual relationships among its researchers, at about 7%, while Novartis and ViiV Healthcare had the highest, at more than 15%, the reporters wrote.

One researcher, an expert in infectious disease at Tufts Medical Center in Boston, Massachusetts, received speaking, consulting, and research payments from three companies in 2012: \$51 000 for research, \$125 000 to speak about the companies' drugs, and \$13 000 for consulting, ProPublica reported.

They said that the researcher had referred questions to the Tufts Medical Center's public relations department, which said in a statement that the researcher was in compliance with Tufts' policy on conflicts of interest and that the center's officials kept

a close watch over his work, conducting a review of his research and relationships with the industry every six months.

Rules governing what, if any, personal compensation researchers can accept from companies that fund their research vary considerably between institutions, the reporters wrote. "The Mayo Clinic and University of California San Francisco prohibit employees from receiving personal compensation from companies that concurrently fund their research. Harvard allows doctors to take no more than \$10 000 annually in personal income from companies funding their research," they said.

A spokesperson for Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, an industry trade group, defended the use of researchers as consultants and speakers, arguing that their expertise could help researchers at other trial sites and help to disseminate information about drugs under study, the reporters wrote. The integrity of research is protected, the spokesperson told ProPublica, by institutional review boards and the US Food and Drug Administration's drug approval process.

But others interviewed for the story questioned whether it was possible to balance a commitment to research with outside work for drug companies.

Eric Campbell, a professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School who studies the topic, told ProPublica, "I would argue that any academic that has the time to be a part time drug salesman needs to have a talk with their department chair right away about how they're spending their time . . . If doctors want to be drug salespersons, they should go to be drug salespersons."

1 Ornstein C, Jones RG. Double dip: doctors paid to advise, promote drug companies that fund their research. ProPublica. 25 March 2014. [www.propublica.org/article/double-dip-doctors-paid-to-advise-promote-drug-companies-that-fund-research](http://www.propublica.org/article/double-dip-doctors-paid-to-advise-promote-drug-companies-that-fund-research).

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