

# Expert panel to view confidential swine flu papers

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(AP) -- An expert panel investigating the World Health Organization's response to last year's swine flu outbreak said Wednesday it wants to see confidential exchanges between the U.N. body and drug companies.

The 29-member panel will seek WHO records and correspondence from before and after the H1N1 strain was declared a pandemic in June, said committee chairman Harvey Fineberg, who is also president of the Institute of Medicine in Washington.

"We will want to have access to certain confidential documents that may be in place here at WHO or elsewhere," Fineberg told reporters in Geneva.

The documents include "contractual or letters of understanding" between the pharmaceutical industry and WHO, he said. "Some of the agreements with industry that we would like to examine have been considered confidential," but so far all of the panel's requests have been met, he said.

WHO spokesman Gregory Hartl said he couldn't immediately comment.

Under criticism for how the outbreak was handled, WHO Director-General Margaret Chan convened the panel last month and urged its members to conduct a "credible and independent review" that she promised would be transparent.

The Geneva-based agency has denied allegations that it gave pharmaceutical companies privileged access to national decision-makers.

Governments around the world spent millions of dollars (euros) buying [antiviral drugs](#) and flu vaccines in anticipation of a serious outbreak that never happened.

Among the companies that benefited was Switzerland's Roche Group, which saw sales of its [Tamiflu](#) antiviral medication jump by 2 billion Swiss francs (\$1.74 billion) last year. British firm [GlaxoSmithKline](#) PLC sold both vaccines and its antiviral [Relenza](#), while France's Sanofi-Aventis SA and U.S.-based Baxter International made vaccines. Some companies donated medicine to poor countries.

WHO has confirmed 18,036 deaths from the H1N1 strain over the past year - far fewer than would have died from seasonal flu during the same period.

Chan said this week at a meeting of WHO's 193 member states that the world had been "just plain lucky" that [swine flu](#) wasn't deadlier.

The panel's final report is expected to be finished next year, and will be made public, Fineberg said.

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