

WHO: Pharma interests didn't influence flu verdict

June 8 2010, By ELIANE ENGELER , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- The head of the World Health Organization said Tuesday that her decisions about swine flu were not influenced by advisers' links to pharmaceutical companies, which were pointed out in a critical journal article this month.

The article last week in the BMJ, formerly known as the [British Medical Journal](#), pointed out that WHO did not disclose potential conflicts of interest among some of the experts involved in writing guidelines for [pandemic flu](#) preparations. Three scientists out of 22 who worked on the guidelines were named as having received some money from pharmaceuticals. The scientists did not work at the drug companies, but were paid for things like speaking at meetings sponsored by them.

The guidelines recommend, among other things, that countries consider buying [antivirals](#) and vaccines to combat a pandemic.

The authors of the BMJ article suggest, without providing direct evidence, that these scientists' ties to [pharmaceutical companies](#) influenced WHO's recommendation that countries buy drugs and vaccines - adding to those drug companies' profits.

"Our investigation has revealed damaging issues," wrote Deborah Cohen of BMJ and journalist Philip Carter. "These [conflicts of interest](#) have never been disclosed by WHO."

WHO's handling of the outbreak is being reviewed by a 29-member

expert panel that will report its findings next year. Critics say many of those panelists are also trusted WHO advisers and government employees who could end up whitewashing any failures.

"At no time, not for one second, did commercial interests enter my decision-making," WHO Director-General Margaret Chan said.

Chan insisted she was open to the panel's criticism. "Should this committee decide that the current definition of a pandemic and the phases leading up to its declaration need to be tightened or otherwise revised, this will be another recommendation that we will welcome, and act on."

The U.S. Health and Human Services department defended the U.N. body.

"WHO handled the outbreak in a very measured and appropriate manner," said Bill Hall, an HHS spokesman. "Their decisions were driven by the existing and evolving conditions at the time." He said there was "no indication whatsoever that any of their decisions were influenced by industry."

Other leading officials agreed.

"There was nothing in those guidelines that was not based on the best science available," said Michael Osterholm, a flu expert at the University of Minnesota who has advised the U.S. on pandemic preparations. He said the scientists consulted were the world's top flu experts and to not include them would have been a major flaw.

Osterholm said that because flu viruses are unpredictable, it was impossible for anyone to predict last spring that [swine flu](#) would not evolve into a more lethal strain.

He slammed the BMJ article, calling it "irresponsible and reckless," and said its authors had not substantiated their claims WHO behaved inappropriately during the pandemic. "It's akin to shouting 'fire' in a crowded theatre without regard to the consequences," Osterholm said.

He said while WHO should be subjected to the highest scrutiny, BMJ's accusations had done "untold damage to the public health infrastructure of the world."

Harvey Fineberg, the president of the Institute of Medicine in Washington, said the review panel which he heads will hear from critics of WHO when it next meets from June 30 to July 2.

A report published by the Council of Europe last week said the guidelines from WHO, European Union agencies and national governments led to a "waste of large sums of public money and unjustified scares and fears about the health risks faced by the European public." The agency is not an EU body.

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