

News

Drug industry payments: “Appalling” lack of progress on transparency

BMJ 2026; 394 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj-2026-100357> (Published 21 July 2026) Cite this as: BMJ 2026;394:e100357

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Efforts to improve transparency around the payments that drug companies make to doctors, which could influence their practice, have been hit by an “appalling” lack of progress, experts warn.

A series of government led workshops on the topic, held between March and July this year, failed to reassure campaigners and researchers that a commitment to mandatory reporting of such payments would be forthcoming, according to attendees who spoke to *The BMJ*.

The 2020 Cumberledge review was commissioned after a series of drug and medical device scandals, including hormone pregnancy tests such as Primodos, the drug sodium valproate, and pelvic mesh implants.¹

The review recommended the mandatory reporting of drug industry payments to teaching hospitals, research institutions, and individual clinicians.

But the review’s lead researcher has now told *The BMJ* that, five years on, the current lack of commitment to action from government was “appalling.”

One prominent campaigner even went so far as to accuse the government of “prioritising industry’s wishes” over patient safety.

Drug and medical device companies often make financial payments or payments in kind to doctors and nurses, researchers, journalists, members of the public, and social media influencers, among others.

Figures indicate that the industry typically spends hundreds of millions of pounds on such payments in the UK every year.²

Concerns about these payments and how they may influence doctors and their treatment of patients have been voiced for years.³

Despite the Cumberledge review specifically recommending the mandatory reporting of such payments, no such commitment seemed likely at the Department of Health and Social Care workshops.

Sonia Macleod, lead researcher on the Cumberledge review and a visiting fellow at the University of Oxford, said the absence of such a commitment, and the long wait for the implementation of a searchable database of payments, was bitterly disappointing.

“It’s particularly appalling given there’s primary legislation in place that would enable a mandatory database to be set up and run—and yet nothing has happened for years,” she said.

Ruth MacLeod (no relation), of campaign group Sling the Mesh (<https://slingthemesh.co.uk/>), which represents the thousands of patients affected by pelvic mesh implants, was also present at the workshops.

She has experienced pain and discomfort for years after a pelvic organ mesh implant. “It’s left me with worse quality of life,” she told *The BMJ*.

She and others have campaigned for a central, government run database of drug industry payments to help avoid similar scandals in the future.

She said, however, that her current understanding was the health department would not create such a database until at least 2028 or 2029. “At this point I’m getting pretty discouraged,” she added.

“By the end, it seemed to me that [the health department was] prioritising industry’s wishes.”

Some attendees were also concerned that the government seemed unwilling to legislate further or go beyond merely establishing voluntary guidance for the drug industry around payment disclosures.

Not only that, campaigners warned that the proposed guidance could see the majority of industry payments being exempt from disclosure.

Workshop attendee Emily Rickard, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Bath who studies drug company payments to patient organisations, warned that there was “a significant blind spot” in how the guidance proposed dealing with research and development (R&D) payments.

Although the guidance is yet to be finalised, Rickard said that the current direction of travel suggested that multiple R&D payments could be lumped together, obfuscating what they were for.

In 2025, 70% of payments (£647.3m) made by the drug industry (not including the medical device industry⁴) were classified as R&D.³

Another concern raised by workshop attendees was the possibility that people would be able to use data protection laws to prevent their names from becoming public as part of disclosures.

“If the data can’t be searched properly, linked together, or interpreted by patients, researchers, and journalists, then accountability remains out of reach,” said Rickard.

“Countries including the US, France, and Denmark have shown that strong life sciences sectors and robust transparency can coexist. The UK shouldn’t see those objectives as competing priorities,” she added.

The situation could evolve in the coming months, however, said Macleod, citing new prime minister Andy Burnham’s recent comments around ending what he called “cover-up culture” in a speech to Parliament on 14 July.⁵

He cited multiple scandals including Primodos and pelvic mesh implants.⁶

“He’s certainly more receptive,” said Macleod. “He acknowledged the harm done. I think there is potentially a shift that may occur.”

Both the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry and the Department of Health and Social Care were approached for comment.

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