**The glaring inadequacies of the vaccination practices in the private sector of India**

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The IJME editorial raises some very contentious yet quite relevant and ethical issues pertaining to vaccination practices in India **[1].** Vaccination is one of the most important preventive measures against infectious diseases and vaccines are a great public health tool. The eradication of smallpox in 70s and near eradication of polio are testimony to this. The Government of India (GoI) has recently added few new vaccines in its Universal Immunization Program (UIP), one of the largest public health programs across the globe. The number of vaccines delivered through this public health program has almost doubled from 6 in 1985. However, some important vaccines are still not part of UIP and hence not available in the public sector. These vaccines such as typhoid, chickenpox, hepatitis-A, HPV, MMR, etc are therefore being given through private sector.

Proper pricing of vaccines in the private sector is a very contentious issue **[2, 3].** One of the reasons is that the private sector of vaccines is poorly regulated and not controlled by the GoI **[4, 5].** There is no code of ethics for the vaccine manufacturers. As a result, the vaccine companies are exploiting this scenario to the fullest/maximum for profiteering.

There is an existing unholy nexus between the vaccine companies, academic bodies and some prominent academicians called as 'Key Opinion Leaders" (KOLs) resulting in the occurrence of corrupt unethical practices in the private sector **[6].**

Almost all major vaccine manufacturers spend crores of rupees to promote their products in various scientific and non-scientific meetings of doctors. They sponsor big conferences of the academic bodies by becoming principal sponsors, distribute freebies (ranging from a carry bags to gold coins) to the delegates coming to these conferences, and also meddle in the scientific content of the conferences to suit their business prospects. They sometimes adopt 'highly unethical' practices like giving incentives to doctors to purchase their products in bulk which again range from free doses of their products to foreign trips **[7].**

Another 'unethical practice' adopted by these vaccine companies is to create a massive difference in the maximum retail price (MRP) of a new vaccine and the price offered to a prospective prescriber. This is another way of 'bribing' a potential prescriber. This practice starts a greedy tendency amongst practitioners and they start viewing vaccines as yet another profit generating commodity rather than a great public health tool. There is no 'cap' on the profits charged by these companies. There are instances where they earn more than 200% margins on a particular product.

**Nexus with academia and academic bodies**

The vaccine companies, both multinational and domestic, try to recruit top academicians/paediatricians/ex-or current office-bearers of the academic bodies as their 'advisory board members' in the guise of providing academic guidance for development and marketing of their products. These professionals are usually popular speakers at conferences and scientific meets. They are paid handsomely both in cash and kind. However, the main objective is to create a hype around a new or an existing product of the company that may or may not be based on valid scientific evidence. At times, these KOLs do their job by creating confusion in the minds of the doctors’ audience by contradicting the valid recommendations made by reputed advisory bodies and thus 'undermining' these national and international level academic bodies. In the bargain, they are paid huge sums as honoraria which is a clear violation of the existing MCI Code of Ethics **[7].**

At times, vaccine industry officials also try to 'bribe' the national level Office-bearers (OBs) of these academic bodies by sponsoring them personally or by acquiring key sponsorship of their major events to get 'favourable' recommendations for their products from the recommending committees of these organizations. There are instances when these companies make a seemingly profitable investment by investing in the campaigns of prospective Presidential candidates of academic bodies during the electioneering itself. With the endorsement of products by prominent KOLs during major scientific events, the sales of these products get soared up to several times. So this nexus is working through a 'quid-pro-quo' basis in which both vaccine industry and the doctors are making money at the expense of consumers, i.e. the unsuspecting parents.

**Need of the hour**

Still majority of doctors, particularly pediatricians, are still contributing to overall improvement in the immunization coverage of key vaccine preventable diseases coming under UIP. However, the problem exists in the practices pertaining to dispensing of newer vaccines. There is a need to direct the appropriate authority to investigate the nexus highlighted above so that the prevalent corruption in the marketing of newer vaccines in the private sector can be curbed. Earning unethically by taking advantage of apprehensions and fears of the society for its children is sheer criminal exploitation. Also, there is a need to bring all the vaccines under the Drug Price Control Orders (DPCO) category, governed by regulatory pricing so that they become affordable to a large section of children.

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