Cash from drug firms linked to positive trials

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Scientists who are paid by the drug industry are three times more likely to report that a medicine works, a study has concluded.

Crucial evidence used to decide what medicines patients are given may be biased by payments from pharmaceutical companies, researchers said.

While the researchers concluded that they could not prove trial results were distorted by financial inducements, they urged tougher scrutiny to ensure that treatment decisions were not skewed.

Pharmaceutical companies have been criticised for designing trials to make their drugs look as effective as possible and for failing to publish studies that do not show their medicines in a good light.

Researchers at the University of San Francisco aimed to look beyond trials funded directly by companies and study the effects of consultancy payments, speaker fees, travel costs and other perks paid to independent scientists.

They took a sample from 2013 of 190 randomised controlled drug trials, considered the gold standard for methodological rigour, including medicines for heart disease, cancer and infections. Just over half the lead authors of the papers had been paid by the drug industry, according to results published in *The BMJ.*

Most of the studies reported positive results and three quarters of authors of the 136 positive studies had financial ties to the industry compared with half the authors of 59 negative studies. After adjusting for who funded the trial itself, authors with financial ties to the industry were three times as likely to report positive results for the drug they studied.

“These findings may raise concerns about potential bias in the evidence base,” the researchers wrote. Payments could encourage scientists to see a company’s products “in a more positive light” and influence how trials were designed and analysed, they said. One “bold option” to solve the problem would be to force scientists to recuse themselves from any studies involving companies they had links with, although this might not be practical.

Other options to mitigate the impact of industry payments could include academic journals requiring independent analysis of results or the publication of full datasets to allow outside scrutiny.

Ben Goldacre, a doctor who has campaigned for more transparency over failed trials, said that the findings were concerning. “The most important thing is that the full methods and results of all trials conducted by all companies and researchers are made publicly accessible,” he said.

Jacintha Sivarajah, of the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry, said: “Calling for peer-reviewed studies that have benefited from industry funding, or where authors have financial ties to the pharmaceutical industry, to be ‘interpreted with caution’ fundamentally undermines the positive collaboration which has allowed medical research to flourish in this country.”