



PHARMACEUTICALS EXPORT PROMOTION COUNCIL

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WHO overplayed swine flu threat

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In a strong indictment of the World Health Organization, a report prepared for the Council of Europe has said WHO wasted large sums of public money by raising unjustified fears of “a pandemic that never really was” and expressed concern over the influence of the pharmaceutical industry on the decisions taken by it regarding the H1N1 virus outbreak.

The report of the social, health and family affairs committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), made public on Friday in Paris, identified what it called “grave shortcomings” in transparency of decision-making at WHO.

It is estimated that around \$18 billion was spent on the H1N1 pandemic across the world.

Fiona Godlee, the editor-in-chief of the British Medical Journal, who attended the PACE meeting, told parliamentarians that according to an investigation by her journal, the WHO guidelines on the use of antiviral drugs were prepared by experts who had received consulting fees from the top two manufacturers of these drugs, Roche and GlaxoSmithKline (GSK).

WHO has been “highly defensive”, the committee said, and unwilling to accept that a change in the definition of ‘pandemic’ enabled the swine flu outbreak to be declared one. The BMJ report also reveals that at least one expert on the secret, 16-member emergency committee formed last year to advise the WHO on whether and when to declare a pandemic received payment during 2009 from GSK.

In January this year, Dr Wolfgang Wodarg, the outgoing chair of PACE’s sub-committee on health, had stated that H1N1 could only have been declared a pandemic by changing its definition. What was suspicious was that various European countries had signed so-called “sleeping contracts” with big pharmaceutical companies which would take effect only on the declaration of a pandemic by WHO, noted a PACE memorandum.

The memorandum said WHO had failed to provide convincing evidence to counter allegations of conflict of interest of many of the members of its advisory bodies who had professional links with several pharma companies and had received extensive research grants from them. According to estimations by international investment bank, JP Morgan, sales of H1N1 vaccines in 2009 were expected to result in overall profits of \$7-10 billion to the pharmaceutical laboratories producing vaccines. According to figures presented by Sanofi-Aventis at the beginning of 2010, the group registered net profits of 7.8 billion euros (an increase of 11%) due to a record year of anti-flu vaccines sales.

In January this year, minister of state for health in India, Dinesh Trivedi too had sought an enquiry into the nexus between pharmaceutical companies and WHO which made the global health watchdog declare H1N1 flu a pandemic virus. We definitely demand an inquiry. WHO is not god, Trivedi had remarked.