

Excerpts of remarks by Fiona Godlee, Editor-in-Chief of the British Medical Journal, during an exchange of views in Paris with PACE's Health Committee on the handling of the H1N1 pandemic, 4 June 2010:

"The report from the Council of Europe on the handling of the flu pandemic is extremely important, and its findings complement the findings of the BMJ's own report, also published today on bmj.com. The BMJ's report, produced in collaboration with the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, finds evidence of declarable financial conflicts of interest among experts advising WHO at the highest level, many of whom have served as paid consultants to manufacturers of influenza drugs and vaccines.

Key guidance from WHO - on the need to stockpile antivirals, on the effectiveness of flu vaccines, and on pandemic flu in general - was authored by experts being paid by industry. Given the huge public cost and private profit from the flu pandemic, the existence of these conflicts of interest is of grave concern, more so because WHO has not been transparent about them.

Also worrying is the existence of a secret "emergency committee" which took key decisions relating to the pandemic: first the decision to downgrade the definition of pandemic in May 2009, and then to announce the pandemic one month later, triggering pre-established vaccine contracts around the world.

WHO's credibility has been seriously damaged by these events. Restoring credibility is crucial if WHO is to serve its proper function as the world's most trusted technical and policy organisation. This must begin with an open evaluation of decision making around the pandemic, with full disclosure of the evidence behind the decisions, the names of those contributing to the decisions, and their conflicts of interest.

The current leadership of WHO may need to resign in light of what such an evaluation will reveal. We must create a world in which the best experts are those that are free from commercial influence. And Europe needs legislation along the lines of the US Sunshine Act to combat both real and perceived commercial influence in science and health care."