

PB 1584 John Stone's response to letters from the Scottish Government and the JCVI

I hope it is in order for me individually to respond to the letters from the Scottish government and the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation as supporting witness in Angus File's petition. The JCVI Secretariat (1) have now responded with a defence of Prof Pollard's appointment which I would like briefly to answer from public documents.

The code of practice of 2013 (cited by Mr Earnshaw as current in his letter) states in section 42 (2):

If a member has in the last 12 months received, or plans to receive a financial payment or other benefit from a business or representative body relating to vaccines or any other product or service that could be under consideration by JCVI...including... holding a directorship or other paid position...the member must declare this interest... If this interest is specific to an agenda item and the payment or other benefit is connected specifically with the product under consideration, the member will be required to absent him/herself from the discussion and any subsequent vote.

Such a conflict does not hinge on receiving direct remuneration from a manufacturer. Prof Pollard is on record as having led the crucial discussion on whether to recommend Bexsero vaccine in the JCVI minutes of February 2014 but he is also Director of the Oxford Vaccine Group. According to a document about the business of the Group submitted by Oxford University to Higher Education Funding Committees' survey REF2014 (3), closing date for submissions 29 November 2013 (4), Prof Pollard had led the development of the vaccine since 2001. The introductory paragraph states:

Oxford University research has also led to the planned use of vaccines against serogroup B meningococcal disease, which have been licensed and recommended for the prevention of disease in high-risk individuals, and broader use is under consideration.

It does not mention that the committee which will consider this broader use is chaired by Prof Pollard himself. The next section begins:

Meningococcal disease is the leading infectious cause of death in children in the UK, and its prevention is a major objective of the Oxford Vaccine Group, directed by Professor Andrew Pollard. During the period from 2001-2013 more than 10,000 volunteers were enrolled in clinical studies in Oxford, mainly children, and the research provided new insight into the design, development and evaluation of novel vaccines for meningitis and specifically meningococcal disease...

The document also mentions patents, whether or not they were any longer current:

The design and development of new vaccines for serogroup B meningococcus by Oxford University have led to a number of patents on the candidate vaccines (based on various surface proteins including Opa, PorA and FetA 17), which provide a licensing position for the University as these vaccines progress through early phase clinical trials.

The position is therefore simple irrespective of any contracts for the Group's work at the time Prof Pollard's appointment the JCVI, or whether he was named on any of them: Prof Pollard was director of OVG and the business of OVG was meningococcal vaccines and Bexsero in particular. This ought, I believe, to have precluded him from chairing the JCVI or certainly discussing Bexsero. Irrespective of manufacturers like Novartis or GSK taking an interest in the product it is stated here by Oxford University in 2013 (the date at which Prof Pollard was appointed the JCVI) that the product is developed by OVG of which Prof Pollard is the director.

The Bexsero decision is controversial. Subsequent to the decision in London the PBAC in Australia (their equivalent of NICE) was still dismissive of the product, both of its effectiveness and value for money (5):

- The PBAC noted that the submission had not addressed the previous concerns of the PBAC in regards to the model, namely uncertain and optimistic assumptions about the extent and duration of effect and herd immunity. The PBAC was also concerned with the discounting rate applied in the model that considerably favoured the 4CMenB vaccine. The PBAC considered that none of the proposed program options were cost effective as presented in the submission.

This underlines how essential it would be for any decision to be completely beyond suspicion, particularly bearing in mind that the Secretary of State for Health was putting pressure on the committee over Bexsero before Prof Pollard was appointed. He wrote in a letter to the acting chair of the JCVI before the June 2013 meeting (6):

I would be grateful if the committee could make the recommendation at the earliest practicable time recognising the need for scientific rigour, a strong evidence base that includes an assessment of cost effectiveness, and proper reflection of the benefits, risks and uncertainties in the committee's advice and recommendation.

There is, I believe, something terribly wrong here and JCVI Secretariat have reacted by defending it. Everyone in the vaccine business would have known that Prof Pollard had spent an important part of his career developing Bexsero and yet by February 2014 when it was back on the agenda at the JCVI he was there in person to chair the meeting which would decide its fate. The problem of how this happened should really be the subject of urgent investigation.

- (1) Andrew Earnshaw, Secretary of the JCVI, PHE to Michael MacMahon MSP, Convener PPC, 7 January 2016
- (2) JCVI Code of Practice 2013
- (3) REF2014, University of Oxford: EFFECTIVE DESIGN, DEVELOPMENT AND EVALUATION OF MENINGITIS VACCINES
<http://impact.ref.ac.uk/casestudies2/refservice.svc/GetCaseStudyPDF/15529>
- (4) <http://www.ref.ac.uk/about/timetable/>
- (5) <http://www.pbs.gov.au/industry/listing/elements/pbac-meetings/pbac-outcomes/2015-07/web-outcomes-july-2015-subsequent-decision-not-to-recommend.pdf>
- (6) https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/239394/SoS_letter_to_JCVI_Men_B_Vaccination_logo.pdf