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Investigative journalist wins British Journalism Award for “expertly researched” BMJ series

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A journalist writing for *The BMJ* has won a British Journalism Award¹ for his series on the financial interests of medical experts advising US and UK governments during the covid-19 pandemic.

As a result of the articles written by Paul Thacker, an investigative journalist, the financial disclosures of members of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) were published for the first time.²

Awarding the prize for specialist journalism, the judges said, “This was expertly researched and written journalism on a subject of huge national importance.”

Thacker’s first story³ looked at two groups critical to the UK government’s pandemic response—SAGE and the Vaccine Taskforce. He examined both and found that they did not disclose their members’ financial conflicts. Some members were tied to companies with a monetary interest in the government’s purchases.

The names and financial interests of both groups’ members were requested from government departments but were denied. Thacker then filed freedom of information (FoI) requests with multiple government departments and Oxford University. In a second story⁴ he wrote about the government’s repeated refusal to turn over these data. However, the FoI turned up heavily redacted emails with government officials discussing their strategy for not disclosing documents. It revealed that Thacker’s original request was apparently sent to a special government department to handle any reporter considered a “campaigner” or to have “extreme views.”

Eventually, the government relented and published the financial conflicts for the members of SAGE.⁵

In the final story of the series⁶ Thacker looked at the panels that the US and UK governments used to authorise vaccines and revealed that these disclosure policies were inadequate. Some experts evaluating the vaccines had significant industry ties that were not disclosed in government forms.

Also nominated in the specialist journalism category was Gareth Iacobucci, *The BMJ*’s assistant news editor, for his coverage of leaked government “moonshot” plans to spend £100bn to expand covid-19 testing.^{7 8}

- 1 British Journalism Awards winners 2021: ITV’s Robert Moore named journalist of the year for Capitol riots and Guardian is best news provider. 2021. <https://pressgazette.co.uk/british-journalism-awards-winners-2021>.
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- 4 Thacker PD. Tracking down John Bell: how the case of the Oxford professor exposes a transparency crisis in government. *BMJ* 2021;372:n490. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n490 pmid: 33622805
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- 7 Iacobucci G, Coombes R. Covid-19: Government plans to spend £100bn on expanding testing to 10 million a day. *BMJ* 2020;370:m3520. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m3520 pmid: 32907851
- 8 Iacobucci G. Operation Moonshot: Leaked documents prompt questions over cost, evidence, and reliance on private sector. *BMJ* 2020;370:m3580. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m3580 pmid: 32938638