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Covid-19: SAGE members' interests published by government 10 months into pandemic

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The government has published a register listing the interests of expert members of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies,¹ after criticism about the group's lack of transparency.

The BMJ highlighted the failure to disclose members' interests last month,² when requests for information from the government were denied or went unanswered. SAGE has been criticised for lack of openness since the start of the pandemic.³

After months of criticism about SAGE's secrecy during the summer, the government reversed course and began releasing the names of SAGE members, minutes of meetings, and some of its policy papers. SAGE members are required to declare their interests, but these disclosures have remained unpublished until now.

Members are expected to declare commercial interests, research interests, details of funding secured or applied for, and previous provision of expert opinion. It is up to the discretion of members to decide what to declare on the form.⁴

The newly released register lists 92 members, of whom 27 declared no interests, while six did not submit a form. Those interests declared by members include research grants, editorial board membership, business holdings, and positions at different bodies and committees.

Two members, Patrick Vallance, England's chief scientific officer, and Andrew Morris, the former chief scientific officer for Scotland, declared shareholdings in the drug company GSK. Jonathan Van Tam declared past consultancies or engagements with GSK, Baxter, and Roche.

Martin McKee, professor of European public health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, commented, "As we roll out the vaccine, trust is more important than ever, and the fact that six people did not disclose whether they had any conflicts is clearly disappointing."

A spokesperson for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy said the register was regularly reviewed and updated.

1 SAGE covid-19 register of participants' interests. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/943607/Covid-19_SAGE_register_of_participants_interests_v2.pdf.

2 Thacker PD. Conflicts of interest among the UK government's covid-19 advisers. *BMJ* 2020;371:m4716. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m4716 pmid: 33298559

3 Coronavirus: three things all governments and their science advisers must do now. *Nature* 2020;579:319-20. doi: 10.1038/d41586-020-00772-4. pmid: 32184490

4 SAGE disclosure form 2020. <https://beta.documentcloud.org/documents/20406969-sage-disclosure-form-2020>.

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