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Cite this as: *BMJ* 2021;372:n490<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n490>

Published: 24 February 2021

INVESTIGATION

Tracking down John Bell: how the case of the Oxford professor exposes a transparency crisis in government

As testing and the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine are hailed as UK pandemic successes, why won't Oxford University or the government disclose the "long list" of financial interests of a high profile researcher at the centre of both? **Paul D Thacker** investigates

Paul D Thacker *freelance journalist*

Since the covid-19 outbreak began early last year, John Bell, regius professor of medicine at Oxford University, has held high profile roles in the UK government's epidemic response while also working with AstraZeneca on the vaccine.

But both Oxford and the government have refused to disclose Bell's financial interests after *The BMJ* filed freedom of information (FOI) requests. More alarmingly, it appears that the government is referring media enquiries about Bell through the Cabinet Office and is scrutinising a reporter for *The BMJ* as it has other reporters it finds troublesome.¹ *The BMJ* has been unable to gain either direct contact with Bell or contact through his employer, Oxford University, despite multiple attempts.

The Daily Mail reported on Bell's financial ties in September 2020, noting that he had £773 000 (€893 000; \$1.1m) worth of shares in the pharmaceutical company Roche.² The newspaper published the story after Roche sold the government £13.5m of antibody tests, which Public Health England later found to be unreliable. Bell had headed the National Covid Testing Scientific Advisory Panel and chaired the government's test approvals group, but he told the *Mail* that he had no role in the purchase and that he had disclosed to the government "a long list of my interests." The government and Oxford University's failure to be open about Bell's financial ties make it impossible for the public to know what, if any, interests the professor has when influencing key decisions about which of the many covid-19 tests the UK should purchase.

Last November, *The BMJ* emailed both Oxford University and the Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) requesting proof that Bell had disclosed his "long list" of financial interests, and asked for copies of any forms. BEIS runs the Vaccine Taskforce, which named Bell and AstraZeneca as members. A BEIS spokesperson then contradicted their own press release, telling *The BMJ* that Bell was a member of the "expert advisory group to the Vaccine Taskforce, rather than a member of the taskforce itself."³ Both BEIS and Oxford University subsequently refused to disclose forms Bell allegedly filled out detailing his financial conflicts.

After these refusals, *The BMJ* filed FOI requests with both Oxford and BEIS, asking for copies of Bell's forms. We also requested that BEIS disclose forms

signed by other Vaccine Taskforce members. In their response, Oxford again refused to disclose Bell's financial interests with industry, stating that the university only publishes the financial disclosures of members of council, its governing body, of which Bell is no longer a member.

BEIS also refused to disclose details of Bell's alleged reporting of financial interests. "Members had to declare conflicts of interest at the start of meetings in relation to topics to be discussed and we can confirm Sir John Bell did so," BEIS replied. The department gave a similar answer to *The BMJ*'s request for financial disclosures by other Vaccine Taskforce members. "We can confirm that members declared conflicts of interest at the start of meetings in relation to the topics to be discussed."

Redacted responses

The need for financial transparency to ensure trust in science and medicine has long been recognised, including by Patrick Vallance, the government's chief scientific adviser. While employed at GlaxoSmithKline, Vallance wrote a 2005 commentary for the *Lancet*, stating, "[I]nteractions with industry are important for medical advance, but they need to be open and unambiguous, and there is an institutional responsibility to ensure this is the case." Vallance continued, "Inferences should be drawn from attempts to hide interactions. These responsibilities are as true for patients' organisations as they are for professional bodies and universities."⁴

The BMJ's information requests uncovered several emails showing government officials discussing our original emailed questions. Citing various exemptions to freedom of information, the government heavily redacted these communications. For example, 24 hours after *The BMJ* requested copies of any financial disclosure signed by Bell and other Vaccine Taskforce members, a BEIS official decided against any disclosure. Emailing his colleagues, he wrote, "Of course, we would not pass them any of the forms."

The government heavily redacted the emails and removed officials' names; however, one exchange implies that Bell did not fill out any conflict of interest (COI) forms. "Just confirm, there isn't any written COI from John?" one official asks. Another official then emails to ensure that the government alerts Bell that *The BMJ* is asking questions about his financial interests.

In the emails that the government released after *The BMJ*'s FOI request, officials also discuss *The BMJ*'s reporter. One asks if the government might be forced to make the information public through FOI requests: "This chap seems to have a bee in his bonnet about conflicts of interest more generally too. Could the COI declarations ever be revealed through an FOI?"

The BMJ's FOI request also uncovered a heavily redacted version of the BEIS response to our request in November for COI forms. The email's subject line is titled, "FOR CLEARANCE," but the government has blacked out multiple names and emails, hiding who had final clearance. A section of the official internal response characterises our reporter as an extremist for sending the questions. "To note, the journalist looks like a campaigner on the issue of pharma companies influence on politics and has some quite extreme views on a verity [sic] of topics," the email reads.

"Should departments be fingering certain journalists as 'campaigners'?" asks Peter Geoghegan, a reporter with openDemocracy, who *The BMJ* asked to review the emails. "Is that their job? It's hard to see how that wouldn't have had an effect on their engagement with *The BMJ*."

The BMJ has previously raised concerns about Bell's financial ties to industry, during a campaign it ran from 2009 for access to the clinical trial data on Tamiflu (oseltamivir), with an open letter to Bell published in 2012.⁵ At that time Bell was on the commercial board of Roche and received \$420 000 from the company in 2011.^{6,7}

Since *The BMJ* approached Oxford University and the government last November about Bell, he has made appearances in many media outlets—such as the BBC, *Channel 4 News*, CNBC, and the *Financial Times*—to comment on public policy. Yet questions remain about the exact sum and nature of his self-confessed "long list" of financial investments, and how that might affect the government's coronavirus policy.

Is freedom of information being undermined?

Last year, openDemocracy released a report, *Art of Darkness: How the Government is Undermining Freedom of Information*, that found that central UK government departments are granting fewer FOI requests and rejecting more since the government passed the FOI law in 2000.⁸ Decision Notices about such stonewalling are given by the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) and have increased by 70% in the past five years.

openDemocracy also documented instances of government officials flagging FOI requests that were filed by specific journalists, and they later detailed an "Orwellian" unit inside Michael Gove's Cabinet Office that acts as a clearing house to approve FOI requests. The unit collates lists of journalists with details about their work, including reporters at the BBC, the *Guardian*, openDemocracy, and the *Times*.

"If the Cabinet Office is interfering in FOI requests and seeking to work around the requirements of the act by blacklisting journalists, it is a grave threat to our values and transparency in our democracy," Labour shadow Cabinet Office minister Helen Hayes said to openDemocracy.

Geoghegan says that the government redacted the names and emails of who approved the official response to *The BMJ*, probably because BEIS was clearing it through a political office within the government. "They're not looking to answer your questions in good faith," Geoghegan told *The BMJ*.

Earlier this month, over a dozen current and former newspaper editors signed a public letter calling for MPs to investigate the UK government's handling of FOI requests. Signatories included editors at the *Financial Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Mirror*, the *Sunday Times*, the *Telegraph*, and the *Times*.

Competing interests: I have read and understood BMJ policy on declaration of interests and have no relevant interests to declare.

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