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A collaboration between physicians and journalists to create unbiased health information

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In an era where “fake news” and biased information are shared in the traditional press and on social media, collaboration between physicians and journalists is increasingly important to help disseminate accurate and trustworthy health information to the general public.¹ Our experience from Japan shows how independent investigative journalists and physicians can collaborate together to publish unbiased and objective health information.

In today’s competitive market in Japan, most traditional media increasingly rely on advertising revenue from for-profit organizations.^{2,3} There are concerns that this financial model has forced some media outlets to refrain from criticising advertisers, or running paid product promotions without making it clear to readers that these are advertisements.^{4,5} This has impaired their independence and undermines their credibility among the public in Japan. Because pharmaceuticals and medical device companies often sponsor the mass media, there are concerns about the impact that this has on healthcare reports and making sure that these are unbiased and free from the influence of commercial organizations.⁶

In this context, investigative media groups that mainly obtain funds from donations or an independent membership system could play an important role in healthcare reporting and dissemination.¹ A notable example is ProPublica in the United States, which often focuses on medical issues in the country.¹ ProPublica created a free public database called Dollars for Doc (<https://www.propublica.org/dataset/dollars-for-docs-2013-2016>) similar to the Open Payments Data by the US Government (<https://openpayments-data.cms.gov>), where they publish details of payments made to physicians from pharmaceuticals and medical devices companies, using data disclosed under the US’s Sunshine Act. ProPublica have used their position to shine a light on other examples of commercial interests in healthcare as well.⁷

This type of business model that relies on donations or membership is notoriously unstable, particularly at the early development stage, when a media group does not have sufficient social recognition and a fragile financial base. To provide professional expertise for investigations related to health, our team of physicians partnered with the Japanese investigative journalist group Tansa (originally called Waseda Chronicle).⁸ In 2017, Tansa was established by journalists to promote journalistic independence. It launched a crowdfunding platform,⁹ and their initial project uncovered that some pharmaceutical companies paid for seemingly neutral health reports about their products published in newspaper articles as a stealth marketing strategy.¹⁰

Tansa has focused on health issues since its foundation, paying particular attention to financial conflicts of interest (FCOIs) between pharmaceutical companies and the healthcare sector.⁴ Japan has no laws similar to the Sunshine Act in the US, and lags behind in establishing a public database similar to the Open Payments Database.¹¹ This is because it has been difficult to reach an agreement between physicians, pharma companies, the medical devices industry, and the government on improving the transparency of FCOIs.

To help overcome this, in January 2019, we launched our first freely accessible database. It is similar to Dollars for Doc by ProPublica and was created through collaboration between physicians and journalists. Doctors contributed to the project by working with the journalists on interpreting the data and providing insights from clinical practice. The database discloses payments made by pharmaceutical companies to healthcare professionals in the fiscal year of 2016 to 2018.^{11,12} In Japan, payments data have been separately disclosed by major pharmaceutical companies in a non-user-friendly format, and previously it was impossible to analyse the whole picture.¹¹ Although the information is limited to data on honorariums to healthcare professionals provided by Japanese pharmaceutical companies, through our database, anyone can freely access details of pharmaceutical payments made to physicians for the first time in Japan.¹² The next step has been to publish pharmaceutical payments made to healthcare organizations.^{11,13-17}

The challenge of this work lies in its long term continuity since our activities are not supported by a stable funding source. Arguably, our database should be a public infrastructure run by the government or related public organizations, but that is unlikely to materialize in the foreseeable future in Japan. Our experience highlights the way in which financial independence, a lack of association with any potential conflicting actors or agencies, and equitable collaboration between physicians and journalists are key components in ensuring the dissemination of correct, reliable, and unbiased health information.

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