

# Trials funded by drug companies: publication or publicity?

Clinical trials published in the most well-known international journals are often viewed very favourably (1). Is this confidence justified?

**Academics often pay little attention.** One research group investigated the actual role played by university academics who were authors of publications of industry-funded clinical trials in influential medical journals. Of note, these academic authors were questioned directly by the authors of the study (2). The study focused on the most recent 200 clinical trials of drugs, vaccines or medical devices that were fully industry-funded, published prior to April 2017 (between July 2014 and April 2017) in one of the seven most influential medical journals, and included at least one academic author (a)(2).

Employees of drug companies were listed among the authors in 87% of cases. The role of the company in reporting the trial was also mentioned in 87% of cases. The company indicated that it had taken part in the analysis of the data in 73% of cases. The academic authors had participated in data analysis in only 40% of cases (2).

**Journals have an interest in the results.** Three of the seven journals published 193 out of the 200 trials (165 of which concerned evaluation of a drug): the *New England Journal of Medicine* (53%), *The Lancet* (31%) and *JAMA* (13%) (2).

The journals benefit in various ways from the spin-offs of publishing industry-funded clinical trials. The articles are more often cited than publications of non-industry-funded trials, which has the effect of increasing the impact factor of the journals and hence their prestige and commercial attractiveness (3,4). Some medical journals derive significant income from the sale of reprints to companies, in particular the *New England Journal of*

*Medicine*, *The Lancet* and *JAMA*, which are also those which published most of the industry-funded trials (3-5).

A former editor-in-chief of the *BMJ* considers that by publishing industry-funded clinical trials, the journals are forming part of the companies' marketing plans (5,6). A former editor-in-chief of the *New England Journal of Medicine* also "gradually and with regret" came to this conclusion (4).

Clinical trials are key components in the marketing of drugs, and the publication of favourable results is an important contributor to their commercial success. Drug companies have a tight grip on the whole process, with all the bias that entails for our knowledge of the real value that the drugs have for patients.

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**a-** The seven highest impact factor journals studied were: *New England Journal of Medicine*, *The Lancet*, *JAMA*, *BMJ*, *Annals of Internal Medicine*, *JAMA Internal Medicine* and *PLoS Medicine* (ref 2).

## Selected references from Prescrire's literature search

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