Mental health policy: the neurobiology offensive

● Political lobbying by pharmaceutical companies is a well-known, established phenomenon. But policy makers are also targeted by other actors in the health sector. These include the French foundation Fondation Fondamental, whose advocacy work addressing mental health care has been analysed in detail in a recent study.

Fondation Fondamental runs about 50 "expert" psychiatric centres in France that provide diagnosis and contribute to research on a number of mental health disorders in adults: treatment-resistant depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and autism spectrum disorder (1). The foundation receives funding from various public institutions and private companies, including several pharmaceutical companies and corporations that own psychiatric care facilities. It promotes a concept of psychiatry that is based on a biological and genetic approach to mental health disorders (2-4). One of its goals is to transform the diagnostic process in psychiatry, based on the idea that "*precision psychiatry*" is "*now achievable thanks to advances in neuroscience and techniques such as non-invasive neuroimaging, genetic sequencing and machine learning algorithms*" (5).

The impact of the Fondation Fondamental's work recently became apparent when 80 members of the French parliament introduced two bills to include these "expert" centres in the country's Public Health Code, to roll the centres out across the entire country, and to put the foundation in charge of their "*medical and scientific*" coordination (1,6-8). In mid-December 2025, French senators ultimately voted to recognise these "expert" centres as tertiary actors in psychiatric care, but this bill is still going through the legislative process.

The supporting rationale for these bills states that developing these centres would halve the number of hospitalisation days for psychiatric disorders and lead to considerable savings of up to €18 billion per year (7,8).

These claims are based on a study that has been widely cited by Fondation Fondamental (1,9). But as scientific publishing experts have highlighted, this study had no control group and was characterised by multiple forms of bias and inappropriate generalisations, including the extrapolation of results to other disorders that were not initially studied, and lack of data on those lost to follow-up. One of the experts has noted with concern the "*worrying lack of a critical mindset among our decision makers and politicians, who are wholly unfamiliar with the concepts of 'non-comparative', 'spin' and 'regression towards the mean'*" (10). The claims made in the foundation's communications have also been reported in the general press, largely without critical analysis (1).

The experts cited above have criticised the foundation for disseminating scientifically flawed arguments (1). To which its representatives have responded that the foundation is not responsible for what policy makers do with its communications… (6).

One thing is certain: the need for evidence-based policy making. When quantitative results or economic arguments are accepted by political decision makers without critical appraisal of where these data come from and whether they are based on robust analysis, it has a harmful impact on patients.

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