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Research financed independently of drug companies: a timely debate

Regulatory agencies cannot properly evaluate medicines based on industry-generated data alone. A debate at *Prescrire's* annual "Pilule d'Or" ("Golden Pill") awards ceremony explored how independently funded clinical trials can become a reality.

The Mediator° (benfluorex) scandal in France has led to the adoption of new medicines legislation. But large-scale development of more independent drugs research is still lacking, in France and elsewhere.

Pharmaceutical companies control the clinical trials of their drugs, and therefore their evaluation. Even if regulatory agencies were to better manage conflicts of interest with the experts they call upon, delivery of marketing authorisations would still depend on data supplied by pharmaceutical companies.

Clinical trials financed independently of pharmaceutical companies are not an impossible utopia. Major, publicly funded clinical trials, most notably in the United States of America, have strongly contributed to a better understanding of the harm-benefit balance of certain drugs.

The present system of inciting healthcare-related research and development is based on market demand. A current of thought has arisen around the world in the past few years, in favour of inventing a system more oriented towards health needs.

The existing system is broken, with few new drugs reaching the market, most often providing no comparative advantage, and sometimes resulting in more harms than benefits - and yet often sold at extravagant prices. The question of finding alternate funding for research and development is therefore a timely one.

For its annual "Pilule d'Or" ("Golden Pill") awards ceremony, *Prescrire* invited three experts to contribute to a conference-debate on this topic.

Clinical trials under the influence: thinking about the alternatives. **Marc-André Gagnon**, Assistant Professor of Public Policy at Carleton University (Canada) and ethics researcher at Harvard University (USA).

Independent clinical trials: answers for better healthcare. **Martine Ruggli**, pharmacist, Swiss pharmacists' association pharmaSuisse.

New models of clinical research in the service of patients. **Germán Velásquez**, health economist, head advisor for health and development, South Centre, Geneva.

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