

Consultants on anything and everything

The decision to entrust the design of France's covid-19 vaccination campaign to the consulting firm McKinsey came as a great surprise (1). Yet it is neither new nor rare to outsource public interest activities to private consultants (2).

Disputed effectiveness in hospitals. Successive French governments have handed important roles in the French hospital system to consulting firms (McKinsey, Boston Consulting Group, Accenture and Capgemini, to name some of the better-known ones). These firms have instigated hospital reforms and provide management consulting services for numerous hospitals (2-5).

France's Court of Auditors (*Cour des Comptes*) considers this outsourcing disappointing, however, commenting that many mission reports merely copy information that is already known, that financial analyses are superficial and their assessments sometimes wrong, and that strategy consulting work is often of poor quality, offering very general recommendations (2). In addition, outsourcing weakens institutions due to loss of in-house expertise (2).

Noted effectiveness for pharmaceutical sales. A consulting firm's core business consists of helping its private-sector clients maximise profits. In the pharmaceutical sector, McKinsey claims to have "contributed to the development of eight of the top ten prescription drug brands and to the handling of eight of the sector's ten largest merger/acquisition deals" (our translation) (6).

Another "achievement", which came to light as a result of lawsuits in the United States, was McKinsey's pivotal role in the marketing used by opioid manufacturers, including Purdue and its opioid drug Oxycontin® (oxycodone) (7). The epidemic of prescription opioid overdoses killed about 250 000 people in the US between 1999 and 2019 (8). The judges criticised McKinsey for advising companies to expand sales of

their highest-strength opioids, for working to hinder the Food and Drug Administration's efforts to limit prescribing of these high doses, for suggesting that opioids be promoted as a means of reducing stress and making patients more optimistic, and for proposing strategies to counter the emotional messages from mothers whose teenage children had overdosed (7).

McKinsey downplayed these accusations, but nevertheless agreed to pay nearly US\$600 million to stop the legal action (7).

Where have our "public servants" gone? What role did McKinsey play in France's covid-19 vaccination campaign, and how effective was it? Why give responsibility for a public health issue to this type of organisation rather than to people who have the interests of public service and society at heart?

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