

Alliance Against Conflict of Interest (AACI)

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David Tovey
The Editor-in-chief of Cochrane
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Sub: Breach of policy on conflict of interest

Dear Mr Tovey,

Policy makers use Cochrane systematic reviews extensively as a source of evidence at global as well as at national level. It is therefore imperative that the process of Cochrane reviews remains free of any potential Conflicts of Interest. It is essential for complete transparency, that the authors of published reviews must disclose all potential affiliations, howsoever remote, that could be perceived as constituting conflict of interest. This will allow the policy makers to make fully informed decisions.

We applaud the Cochrane Collaboration for trying to adhere to this principle in earnest. These efforts such as 1 and 2 given below show Cochrane's intent towards addressing Conflicts of Interest while developing the reviews.

1. Detailed information about implementing the conflict of interest policy in practice. <http://community.cochrane.org/editorial-and-publishing-policy-resource/conflict-of-interest-scenarios>
2. Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest by authors. <http://community.cochrane.org/editorial-and-publishing-policy-resource/conflicts-interest-and-cochrane-reviews>

We are writing this communication to you to highlight a vital breach of the Cochrane Conflict of Interest Policy. A systematic review on 'Multiple-micronutrient supplementation for women during pregnancy' was published on 1 November 2015 (Haider BA, Bhutta ZA. Multiple-micronutrient supplementation for women during pregnancy. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2015, Issue 11. Art. No.: CD004905. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD004905.pub4.)

One of the author, Dr. Z.A Bhutta has declared only his association with a clinical trial (UNIMAPP trial, 2009a) in the Conflict of Interest section. However, information about his involvement with nutrient manufacturing industry in various capacities has not been disclosed in the publication. Some of his associations with the industry, which we have noticed:

- **The Nestlé Nutrition Council:** "Dr. Z.A. Bhutta is a member of the Nestle Nutrition Council, which includes leading international nutrition scientists. It is instrumental in advising on and challenging the reviews of our (their) research programmes. The Council considers and advises our (their) senior management team on nutrition challenges and their potential impact

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to Nestlé's policies and strategy." See: <http://www.nestle.com/csv/what-is-csv/governance> (yellow highlighted areas in the attached pdf).

- **The Consumer Goods Forum:** Dr. Z.A.Bhutta is a member of the External Scientific Advisory Council of the Consumer Goods Forum. See: <http://www.theconsumergoodsforum.com/health-and-wellness-about-pillar/governance/external-scientific-advisory-council> The Forum is a conglomeration of various manufacturers and retailers of the consumer goods. It includes many companies manufacturing food products like Nestle, Danone, Pepsico, Kellogs, Coca-Cola, GlaxoSmithKline, Unilever etc. See: <http://www.theconsumergoodsforum.com/about-the-forum/our-members>

Currently, there is considerable advocacy for replacing the routine iron folic acid supplementation in pregnant women with multiple micronutrient supplementation; Prof. Bhutta's Cochrane review makes a strong plea for this. International agencies and national programs are in the process of making guidelines on this subject. In the interest of complete transparency and for robust decision making, it is imperative for these affiliations to be declared in the published review. We believe that such affiliations of Dr. Bhutta are a clear instance of Conflict of Interest, which should be declared.

We request you to kindly initiate appropriate action that you deem fit in light of our communication above.

In future, the Cochrane collaboration may also like to consider formulating appropriate guidelines for action on authors who do not disclose their conflicts of interest. Another related issue is whether such individuals should be allowed to become Editors of Cochrane Groups, which deal with topics under the ambit of their potential conflict of interests (for example, Prof. Bhutta is an Associate Editor of Psychosocial and Development Group, which publishes related nutrition reviews).

Our intent is to be constructive in nature so that the integrity and credibility of Cochrane reviews scales greater heights.

We look forward to an early response and action from your end after bringing this to your attention.



Dr. Arun Gupta

On behalf of Alliance Against Conflict of Interest (AACI)

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