Conflicts of Interest Abound in Hepatitis C Treatment Guidelines

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A recent investigation into the Institute of Medicine (IOM) has revealed that several committee members tasked with setting official hepatitis C virus (HCV) treatment guidelines in 2015 had significant conflicts of interest involving the pharmaceutical and health care industries.

The study, published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), raises serious concerns about the ethics of the group's official hepatitis C recommendations, ContagionLive reports.

IOM is a division of the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, a conglomerate of private nonprofit institutions that provide expert advice to international policy makers on health care issues. The group's 2015 HCV guidelines encompassed protocols on testing, management, treatment and additional aspects of the liver virus that were meant to be considered by doctors around the world as evidence-based and bias-free.

According to the group's own ethics standards, which researchers called up in a 2011 IOM report titled Clinical Practice Guidelines We Can Trust, a chair or cochair of any guideline committee in the organization must not have any commercial conflicts of interest. Within the committee as a whole, in order to meet ethics protocols less than 50 percent of members are permitted to have commercial conflicts of interest.

However, after analyzing disclosure statements of all 29 HCV guideline committee members in IOM, researchers found that 21 (72 percent) had a commercial conflict of interest. Of the six guideline cochairs, four (67 percent) reported commercial conflicts of interest. Both figures were well above the organization's own ethical standards.

The JAMA report also found that of the 29 committee members 18 (62 percent) disclosed industry-sponsored research. What's more, disclosures of these biases appeared to be inconsistent in guidelines disclosures and articles.

Study authors said the discovery of these conflicts of interest is important because medical guidelines are supposed to be developed in a transparent and trustworthy manner.

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