



EXCLUSIVE

# Labour considers crackdown on big pharma payments to NHS doctors

*The i Paper* found mental healthcare professionals have accepted £1m from pharmaceutical companies since 2021



The number of Britons taking antidepressants and ADHD medication has surged in recent years (Photo: Yulia Reznikov/Moment RF/Getty)

## Alexa Phillips

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The NHS faces a crackdown on payments from [pharmaceutical companies](#) after *The i Paper* revealed that [mental health medics have accepted nearly £1m](#) from firms since 2021.

Labour is considering the implementation of a mandatory and expanded register of medical firms' payments, which had stalled under the previous Conservative Government, *The i Paper* understands.

An announcement on the policy is expected in the coming months.

MPs said an inquiry and greater transparency in the payments system is needed to address the risk of "corruption" in the NHS.

It comes after an analysis of the pharmaceutical industry’s voluntary Disclosure UK database found that payments to NHS mental healthcare professionals have been steadily rising, raising concerns about the ability of pharmaceutical firms to influence treatment decisions.

Major manufacturers of [medications for depression](#), anxiety and [ADHD](#) were among firms paying healthcare professionals for contracted services and covering expenses such as registration fees, travel and accommodation.

For example, a consultant psychiatrist may be paid by a pharmaceutical company to speak at a medical conference in order to educate others or share research, and the NHS allows medics to do this in addition to their job in the health service.

MPs and doctors raised concerns that medics could be influenced to favour specific drugs for mental and neurodevelopmental disorders or prescribe them over non-pharmaceutical interventions such as talking therapies.

## Pharma payments on the rise



Money spent by pharmaceutical firms on payments and benefits for mental healthcare professionals



Source: The i Paper analysis of Disclosure UK data

A government-commissioned review on medical safety by Baroness Cumberlege, published in 2020, warned of a lack of transparency about medical firms’ payments to NHS staff following a series of health scandals.

After vaginal mesh transplants left some women with chronic pain, it emerged that doctors promoting them had received payments from manufacturers.

## Recommendations have not happened

Baroness Cumberlege recommended the mandatory disclosure of payments by medical firms to clinicians, hospitals and research institutions and said the information should be publicly available in a central register of interests.

In their response to the recommendation, the previous Government said it would fully implement mandatory reporting in 2023 and expand the requirement to all registered healthcare professionals, but this has not happened.

A consultation was held in 2023 on the introduction of secondary legislation to impose a duty on the manufacturers and commercial suppliers of medicines, devices and borderline substances to report details of the payments and other benefits they provide to healthcare professionals and organisations.

The health minister at the time, Will Quince, said it would help address “real and perceived conflicts of interest” in the healthcare system.

Sharon Hodgson, a Labour MP and chair of the cross-party group on the Cumberlege report, said “increased transparency into the huge sums of money industry gives to our healthcare system” is necessary.

“Baroness Cumberlege highlighted the need for this in her landmark Cumberlege review but we are yet to see action,” she said.

## **‘Corruption exists’**

She said legislation similar to the Sunshine Act in the US is needed to “uncover the corruption that we know exists”.

The Sunshine Act, also known as Open Payments, is a law that requires manufacturers of drugs, medical devices, biologics and medical supplies to report detailed information about payments and other “transfers of value” worth more than \$10 (£7.40) from manufacturers to health care providers and teaching hospitals. The information is published centrally on the Open Payments website.

Ms Hodgson said: “Making this information public would mean that any gifts or coercive money given from industry to clinicians, researchers, teaching hospitals and health charities would have to be fully declared. This should be presented via a centralised public database which is independent of industry.

“This would mean that anyone could see which healthcare professionals have taken money from industry in a click of a button.”

Andrew George, a Liberal Democrat MP and member of the Health Select Committee, said anything “which might be perceived to influence professional clinical decisions” should be disclosed.

He said he would support a Health Select Committee inquiry on the subject.

Joe Robertson, a Labour MP and another member of the Health Select Committee, said the financial incentives received by doctors “have the ability to cloud their judgment”.

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He said: “If I was being treated by a practitioner and I knew they were receiving any money from a drugs company, and then they had to exercise their medical judgment in order to prescribe me the most suitable thing, I would be slightly concerned.”

He added that payments for NHS healthcare staff to attend conferences raised concerns that they would be encouraged to become advocates for their products.

Some experts previously told *The i Paper* that more transparency would be welcome, but restrictions on payments were needed to protect patients.

Dr Simon Opher, a Labour MP, GP, and head of the cross-party group on health, said payments from pharmaceutical firms to healthcare professionals were “totally immoral”, would always cause “undue influence” on treatment decisions and should be banned.

Dr Amit Aggarwal, medical director at the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry, said: “Any company payments or benefits in kind to NHS and other healthcare professionals must come with no expectation of prescribing that company’s medicines, and must be transparently declared by companies through Disclosure UK – as it appears these have been.”



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