

Exposed: MMR experts' cash link to vaccine firms

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NEW evidence of the financial links between the makers of the controversial MMR vaccine and experts charged with assessing its safety has been uncovered by a Scotland on Sunday investigation.

We can reveal that the chairman of the expert group set up by the executive to investigate the jab, the Very Reverend Graham Forbes, is linked to one of the manufacturers of the vaccine, GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), through his church.

Another member of his committee, Professor Lawrence Weaver, also has shares in GSK through an investment plan.

Four members of the group are already known to have links to the drug companies through shares or academic funding. Scotland on Sunday's new revelations mean six of the 18-strong group have connections.

Last week, the group published its long-awaited report on the MMR vaccine, and controversially recommended that Scottish parents should not be offered single jabs as an alternative to the triple vaccine.

Scotland on Sunday can also reveal that a Scottish-led £500,000 research programme into possible links between MMR, autism and bowel disease is being opposed by an anonymous scientific advisor who admits to being paid by another manufacturer of the vaccine.

Scottish scientists fear the project - which would be the biggest ever investigation into links between MMR and autism - has been put at risk by the submission to the Medical Research Council funding body. The unnamed scientist describes the planned work as "fringe medicine".

The expert group, chaired by Forbes, was set up last August by the Scottish Executive to provide a definitive assessment of the safety of the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine. It followed concern among parents about the jab and a slump in the vaccination rate.

Now, official documents seen by Scotland on Sunday have revealed that Forbes, who is Provost of St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral in Edinburgh, has links to the controversial vaccine. Money from the cathedral's endowment fund has been invested in GSK.

The documents also show that respected academic Professor Lawrence Weaver, who is head of the department of child health at Glasgow University, has links to the same drugs company.

Shares in GSK were bought on behalf of Weaver as part of a PEP investment plan.

When Scotland on Sunday approached Forbes and Weaver, they insisted they had declared their investments soon after the expert group was set up. Both denied they had been influenced by the holdings.

Further evidence connecting pharmaceutical firms to expert advisors has emerged in a document sent to the Medical Research Council (MRC), which has been obtained by Scotland on Sunday.

In it, an unnamed scientist, who admits receiving money for acting as a an expert witness on behalf of MMR firm Merck, presses the funding body not to give a grant to the pioneering Scottish-based research project aiming to examine links between the vaccine, autism and bowel disease.

The study, due to begin in October, will not be able to go ahead without MRC funding.

Researchers hope to examine the theory that the measles virus from the MMR vaccine is causing autism and bowel disorders in children. It is the theory which first ignited the debate over the safety of the combined measles, mumps and rubella vaccine.

But in the letter to the MRC, in response to a request to 'referee' the application, the academic says: "The theory is entirely discredited and is fringe medicine, carried out in private laboratories, and published in fringe journals."

The scientist, who admits his link to Merck, continues: "One therefore has to ask if it is the MRC's remit to refute fringe notions on which there is no recent published data from the proponents of the controversial hypothesis."

One academic involved in the planned research said the scientist's recommendations had put the project at risk.

The academic, who asked not to be named, said: "I am worried that this may sway the MRC and put our research at risk.

"This person is trying their utmost to block our research without providing any valid scientific reasons. They are saying they do not want the project to go ahead, full stop, because it is quack medicine. This is complete nonsense."

The study would examine the guts of 1,000 children - half of them autistic - for the presence of the measles virus and gut damage.

An MRC spokeswoman said: "Grant applications are looked at by independent reviewers in the field. We take these comments into account when we make a funding decision."

Bill Welsh, chairman of the campaign group Action Against Autism, said he was

alarmed by the extent of financial links between scientific experts and the MMR firms.

He said: "Inappropriate financial links have scarred the whole MMR debate."