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# Health advisers' interests to stay secret

NATASHA BITA  
CONSUMER EDITOR

GOVERNMENT health advisers have been ordered to disclose their financial interests in pharmaceutical companies — but the details will stay secret.

The Health Department's Therapeutic Goods Administration has released its first "declaration of interests" guidelines for the dozens of eminent scientists, medical specialists and researchers serving on its 10 expert advisory committees.

The paid advisers must tell the TGA about any shares, consultancies, contracts, grants, sponsorships, directorships, partnerships, patents or other investments that could be seen as a "conflict of interest" in providing impartial advice.

Any payments to attend or address conferences, or hospitality paid for by a pharmaceutical company, must be disclosed, along with details of all corporate clinical trials and advisory work.

"It is recognised and accepted that given the nature of members' professional expertise and the fact that in Australia there are a limited number of people with

expertise and experience in relevant fields, members will, from time to time, have an interest in matters being considered by an advisory committee," the document states. "The fact a member has such an interest does not automatically, however, preclude that person from participating."

The register of financial interests will not be made public, as the TGA fears that exposure would make experts less inclined to assist the TGA.

The World Health Organisation and scientific journals including *The Lancet* and the *Medical Journal of Australia* have long required their advisers and contributors to publicly declare their financial interests.

But the Parliamentary Secretary for Health, Catherine King, said yesterday health advisers had declared their interests "on the understanding that the details be disclosed only where appropriate for the purposes of good governance". "The obvious confidences should be respected and, on our advice, are legally protected," she said.

But Australian National Uni-

versity medical professor Peter Collignon said yesterday the public had a right to know if health advisers had a financial interest in products or health issues they were assessing. "If you are on a panel that advises the government, those conflicts ought to be made public," he said.

*The Australian* has revealed that the chairman of the Health Department's immunisation advisory committee, Terry Nolan, and fellow member Peter Richmond, supervised pediatric trials of flu vaccines for drug giant CSL, whose flu shot has been banned for the under-fives after triggering febrile convulsions.

Another adviser, Anne Kelso — who helped draw up Australia's response to the swine flu outbreak in 2009 — holds an undisclosed number of shares in CSL, which won a \$131 million government contract to supply Australia's stockpile of swine flu vaccine. All three have denied any conflict of interest.

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