Corporate sponsorship of PrEP research: are there any articles free of industry sponsorship?

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JAMA,

The recent JAMA PrEP articles are of considerable interest, particularly given that this intervention is prioritized in the ongoing national HIV response (1,2,3). However, it is disturbing that both the articles and the commentary included authors receiving support from Gilead, the manufacturer of the medicines used in PrEP. While this was stated at the end of the articles in the fine print, it raises questions regarding potential conflicts of interest in both interpreting and commenting on the results.

It also begs the question what proportion of past JAMA articles on PrEP have benefited from Gilead support. Searching for “PrEP” AND “JAMA” on PubMed, resulted in 7 articles and 1 news article with PrEP in the title. Most of the articles argued for the use of PrEP as the most important HIV prevention intervention. Of the seven articles, 5 of them had one or more authors who had received Gilead support and/or study drugs. Two of the seven articles included Gilead employees as co-authors. The 2018 PrEP review article had two of three authors receiving Gilead support. One news article, by CDC, had an unlisted potential conflict of interest (CDC claims patent rights on PrEP and is negotiating compensation with Gilead) (4).

If 100% of the scientific articles ever published in JAMA on PrEP have some form of industry sponsorship, then this corporate-driven crowding out could have compromised the scientific discussion. Additionally, the search included only JAMA articles and there is a likelihood that other journals have a similar track record of publishing industry sponsored PrEP articles. This profit-driven scientific advocacy pumping PrEP may have contributed to its widespread promotion by major agencies, resulting billions of dollars in sales revenue.

Editors have a major role to play. Arguments that receiving industry funding should not preclude publication are problematic in many instances (5)—if a major part of an author or co-author’s compensation and/or institutional support and/or ability to conduct the trial comes from Gilead, how is it possible to be unbiased regarding the science involving their products? By noting sponsorship, can readers discern the difference between an advertisement cloaked as a science article and an objective scientific article? The amount of financial support is of interest as well. Unfortunately, standard practice does not mandate transparency. However, unrestricted grants, provision of drugs, speaking engagements, and serving as advisors likely translate in at least 6 figures for individuals, institutions and study groups. This industry influence on authors is of particular concern for commentaries and reviews that may be sponsored to attenuate the negative implications of unfavourable study results.

PrEP, when used, is a highly efficacious form of HIV prevention and has a role to play in the overall response. However, most of the recent industry sponsored JAMA PrEP articles are not balanced and serve to obscure or do not mention important individual and public health issues. This includes the frequent conflation of treatment and PrEP as equal biomedical prevention interventions. They are nothing of the sort, with treatment preventing HIV illness, death and transmission for people living with HIV while PrEP only prevents HIV acquisition in those who may be at risk of infection. The comparable intervention with PrEP is condoms or male circumcision. This conflation has resulted in both PrEP and treatment receiving similar prioritization in the press and other media. It is also reflected in US HIV control efforts, with PrEP seeming to get far more emphasis than treatment and viral

suppression. Additionally, unlike treatment that is 100% effective in preventing transmission when a person is virally suppressed, at least two PrEP trials had zero effectiveness—this is almost never stated in PrEP promotional articles. Likewise, articles do not address the enormous costs and the low cost effectiveness of implementing PrEP nationwide in the face of higher levels of viral suppression—with fewer people being infectious increasingly higher numbers of people will need to be on PrEP to prevent one new infection. PrEP promotion obscures the debate regarding personal responsibility to protect oneself with PrEP or condoms vs. the responsibility to others to know your status and be on treatment to protect others. Gender issues, given that almost no women are accessing PrEP, are another blind spot for most articles. Other issues that merit deeper consideration include the potential influence of revenue from the CDC Gilead patent conflict on policy making, the programmatic burden of administering PrEP while prioritizing more important interventions, the potential negative impact on sexually transmitted disease control, and the depressingly low uptake even despite the massive marketing campaign. PrEP should be part of the national HIV response but to determine its role we need a robust scientific debate that does not include industry putting its thumb on the scale.

Perhaps next time JAMA publishes on this important topic it can find a study that is not sponsored by Gilead. If impossible, then having at least one commentary from authors who do not receive industry support would seem reasonable. JAMA has an important leadership role in the US and beyond. It should do all it can to prevent corporate incursions into the scientific process to avoid being perceived as a mouthpiece for the pharmaceutical industry and its scientist employees.

Best,

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Table 1: JAMA articles with PrEP in title and partial list of conflicts of interest (1947 to April 10th 2019)*

No.	Date	First author	Authors with potential COI**	Topic	Type	COI declared	Gilead grant	Gilead provided drugs	Gilead institutional support	Gilead employee	CDC
1	2019	Gandhi	Mayer	PrEP	Commentary	Yes	X		X		
2	2019	Traeger	All	PrEP STIs	Article	Yes		X			
3	2019	Riddell	Mayer, Amico	PrEP	Review	Yes	X		X		
4	2019	Mugwanya	Mugwanya, Mugo, Baeten others?	PrEP Kidney	Article	No		X			
5	2019	Liu	Grant, Buchbinder, Rawings Anderson Other?	PrEP Community	Article	Yes		X	X	X	
6	2018	Kuehn	Kuehn	PrEP	News	No					X
7	2017	Hosek	Hosek Mayer Anderson Rooney	PrEP Youth	article	Yes	X	X	X	X	
8	2014	Mugo	Mugo, Baeten, others?	PrEP pregnancy	Article	No			X		

*Internet search revealed other declarations of interest indicating some form of Gilead support for selected authors, co-author lists were extensive and not all authors of were reviewed for prior conflicts.