Sunshine on KOLs: assessment of the nature, extent and evolution of financial ties between the leaders of professional medical associations and the pharmaceutical industry in France from 2014 to 2019: a retrospective study

Marie Clinckemaillie, Alexandre Scanff, Florian Naudet, Adriaan Barbaroux

ABSTRACT

Objective To investigate the financial relationships between key opinion leader (KOL) or non-KOL physicians and pharmaceutical and device companies in France.

Setting All doctors practising in France, with a focus on 548 KOLs (board members of the professional medical associations that published guidelines in 2018–2019, identified on the associations’ websites between 2018 and 2020). Ties were collected from the ‘Transparency in Healthcare’ database.

Main outcome measures The number and the value of gifts from 2014 to 2019, and of remunerations and contractual agreements from 2017 to 2019.

Results KOLs represented 0.24% of the total number of physicians in France. The total value of gifts declared in the French database for all physicians amounted to €818M (US$936M, £741M). At least one gift was declared for 83% of KOLs. KOLs’ gifts represented 0.68% of the total number of gifts to physicians and 1.5% of the total value of gifts, with a mean of €3700 per capita per year. The total value of contractual agreements declared for all physicians amounted to €125M. Contractual agreements involving the KOLs represented 0.72% of the number of contractual agreements with physicians and 2.5% of the value of the agreements, with a mean of €1900 per capita per year.

CONCLUSION Financial relationships between KOLs and the industry in France are extensive. KOLs have much more financial ties than non-KOL practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

Financial ties between healthcare workers and the pharmaceutical industry may affect every aspect of medical activity, from research to clinical practice. Clinical trials and meta-analyses sponsored by the pharmaceutical industry are more likely to conclude that drugs are effective than non-sponsored trials. Industry transfers of value to physicians have been shown to be associated with more expensive, more frequent and lower quality prescriptions. Recommendations for clinical practice, which define diagnostic criteria and disease treatment, can also be influenced, since their authors often have ties with the industry.

Following the example of the USA with the US Physician Payments Sunshine Act, France...
created the Transparency in Healthcare public database
(transparence.santé.gouv.fr) in 2014.14-16 Pharmaceutical
tical and medical device industries are required by law
to disclose the value of gifts, contractual agreements and
remunerations they transfer to healthcare professionals
in France. In this database, ‘Gifts’ include anything that is
granted without consideration, in kind or in cash, directly
or indirectly, with a value greater than or equal to €10
(US$11.4) including taxes. ‘Remunerations’ represent the
payment by companies for work or services with a
value greater than or equal to €10. ‘Contractual agree-
ments’ involve obligations on both sides: participation
in a congress, research or clinical trial activity, training
action, etc. For more convenience, this paper will gather
both pharmaceutical and medical device industries under
the term ‘pharmaceutical industry’.

The term ‘key opinion leaders’ (KOLs) refers to physi-
cians who influence their peers’ medical practice, which
includes but is not limited to prescribing behaviour. It
was coined by sociologists who demonstrated that people
were more likely to change their opinions under the
influence of individuals in their network than because
of the media or advertising: physician social networks
hold a major influence in making physicians adopt a
new drug.17 18 Pharmaceutical companies hire KOLs at
different stages of the drug development process, from
clinical trials to promotion.19 20 Typically, KOLs are physi-
cians or researchers who are respected in their field and
recognised for their work, such as board members of
professional medical associations.20-24

Major ties between the leaders of professional medical
associations and the pharmaceutical industry have recently
been described in North America.11 12 In France, these
financial ties had never been studied.

This paper uses the data from the Transparency in
Healthcare database to describe the nature, the extent
and the evolution of the financial ties of all physicians
in France, with a focus on KOLs. The ties of professional
medical associations were assessed by grouping the gifts,
contractual agreements and remunerations received by the
KOLs of each professional medical association.

METHODS
We conducted a retrospective study of the financial rela-
tionships between industry and the board members of
national professional medical associations that publish
clinical practice guidelines. As per our protocol (registra-
tion number: osf.io/m8syh), we took into consideration
the financial ties of each KOL from 2014 to 2019. KOLs
were defined as board members of an association from
2018 to 2020.

Identifying professional medical associations
Professional medical associations were defined as any
group of physicians who publish clinical practice guide-
lines in France. One author (MC) built the list of eligible
associations by cross-checking three different databases:
the ‘Bibliothèque Médicale AF Lemanissier’ (BMLweb),25
the ‘Catalogue et index des sites médicaux de langue
française’ (CISMÉF),26 and the ‘Le Parisien’ catalogue
of professional medical associations.27 We included only
national associations and excluded association titled
as concerning a ‘rare disease’. The BML website is an
academic medical library that lists month by month all the
consensus statements, guidelines and recommendations
published in French. MC conducted a search through it
from January 2018 to December 2019 and selected all the
national professional medical associations regardless of
the nature of the publications they were listed for. The
next step was to examine the Cismef website, which has a
‘learnt society’ section that lists French speaking profes-
sional medical associations. MC selected all the profes-
sional medical associations in France from that list. Finally,
MC used the ‘Le Parisien’ database that lists French learnt
societies, and selected all the professional medical associ-
ations in the ‘medical science’ section. Duplicates were
then eliminated and MC examined the associations one
by one to determine whether they had published guide-
lines in 2018 or 2019. To do so, BMLweb was used fist
then the search engine for clinical practice guidelines of
the Cismef website if there was no match on BMLweb,
and finally Google Scholar and the association website.

Identifying KOL
Using each professional medical association’s website,
MC identified between October 2018 and May 2020 all
the physicians who were board members.

KOLs were defined as members of the association’s
board or governing council but not of sub-committees.
KOLs were identified by name, medical specialty and
city of practice via the medical association website and if
missing on Google. Discrepancies and uncertainties were
resolved by discussion with a second author (AB).

The Transparency in Healthcare database was down-
loaded on 18 May 2020 from the EurosForDocs28 website.
EurosForDocs is a tool inspired by the American website
DollarsForDocs. EurosForDocs aims to help browsers
find and understand information in the Transparency in
Healthcare database by cleaning and grouping payments
by categories and beneficiaries. It also harmonises the
identification of doctors using their unique identifica-
tion number in the National Healthcare Professional
Registry: the Répertoire Partagé des Professionnels de
Santé (RPPS). The RPPS of KOLs were identified by AS
in the Health-Directory database and the Transparency
in Healthcare database. Uncertainties were resolved by
manual inspection (MC).

Identifying and extracting payment details
By using the RPPS unique identification number, data
regarding payments to the identified leaders29 were
extracted using the database categories: gifts, contractual
agreements and remunerations. We took the data into
consideration starting from the date on which their decla-
ration became mandatory: gifts from 1 January 2014 to 31
December 2019 and contractual agreements and remunerations from 1 January 2017 to 31 December 2019.

The characteristics and date on which declaration of the payments became mandatory are presented in table 1.

**Outcome measures and descriptive analyses**
The primary outcome was the total number and value of gifts received by all physicians and by the identified KOLs year by year since 2014.

A secondary outcome was the number and value of payments in the two additional categories available after 2017 (ie, contractual agreements and remunerations) year by year since 2017.

The distribution of payments to individual KOLs grouped by professional medical association is also presented. Quantitative data were described using the median (IQR) rather than the mean to be less biased by extreme observations. Binary outcomes were described using n (percentage). All analyses were performed using R.30

### Changes to protocol

The secondary outcome concerning contractual agreements and remunerations was not part of the protocol as these declarations were not mandatory before 2017. However, after having observed that the value of remunerations represented more than three times the yearly value of gifts, it was decided to include contractual agreements and remunerations because without them, an important part of physician-industry ties would have been missed.

We identified some outliers with implausible amounts which seemed to indicate that some of the information in the database contained errors (eg, some gifts may have been reported in cents by the company (outliers typically ending in two zeros)). It was therefore decided a posteriori to exclude amounts exceeding €100 000 (US$118 000) for a single payment. This corresponds to 35 extreme observations (34 in 2019, 1 in 2018, that is, 0.0005% of the gifts) for an amount of €32 M (4% of the total and 13% of 2019).

**Patient and public involvement**

Patients and public were involved through the French FORMINDEP association which aims to improve the independence of physicians’ medical education. FORMINDEP members (patients and physicians) kindly accepted to participate by reviewing and editing the manuscript. The French CI3P organisation (Patient and Public Partnership Innovation Center of the Faculty of Medicine of Nice) also accepted to participate in the manuscript’s revision and editing. Their comments improved the manuscript’s quality, especially the discussion.

### RESULTS

**Participants**

We identified 238 professional medical associations. A total of 101 of them had produced clinical practice guidelines in 2018 and/or 2019 and two of them had no website or did not describe their board on their website. We identified 605 KOLs. 548 of them were found on the Transparency in Healthcare database. The number of KOLs in each professional medical association ranged from 1 to 12, with a median of 6. 12 KOLs belonged to more than

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of ties</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Mandatory information to declare</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gifts</td>
<td>Anything that is allocated or paid without consideration by a company to a health actor, with a value greater than or equal to €10 including taxes. Available categories on the website–gifts, contribution to the cost of promotional, scientific or professional events, accommodation, hospitality, catering, transport, transport and hospitality, in-kind donations, donations, donations of money, grants, training, expenditures for services and advice, fees, failed category association, empty, other.</td>
<td>Identity of the parties concerned, amount, nature and date of each gift. Mandatory since the law of 2013; actual website availability in 2014.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contractual agreements</td>
<td>Contracts involving obligations on the part of the physician and the industry. For example, participation in a congress as a speaker by the physician with payment for the lecture by the company, or participation at the presentation of a new medical device by the physician with payment for transport and accommodation by the company. The agreements concern research activities, clinical trials, participation in a scientific congress or training activities.</td>
<td>Identity of the parties concerned, the organiser, the name, date and place of the event, date of the agreement, its precise purpose (mandatory since the law of 2013), actual availability on the website since 2014 and the amount (mandatory since the law of 2016, actual availability on the website since 2017). If the agreements give rise to payments in gifts or remuneration, the payments can be reported in the agreements category or the gifts or remunerations categories, with a numerical link to the agreement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remunerations</td>
<td>Payment for work or services with a value of more than €10 including taxes.</td>
<td>Identity of the parties, final beneficiary, date of payment, amount if it is greater than or equal to €10 (available since 2015 but mandatory since the law of 2016, actual website availability in the remuneration section in 2017).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The transparency in healthcare database was laid down in the ‘strengthening the safety of medicines and health products’ law of December 2011, and launched in July 2014.
one professional medical association. The way KOLs were identified is described in the figure 1.

**Transparency in Healthcare public database**

The database reported financial ties totaling €6B (US$7.1B) over 8 years. Gifts accounted for €1.7B, contractual agreements for €1.3B and remunerations for €3B.\(^1\) Gifts, contractual agreements and remunerations are presented below starting from the year in which they were consistently declared, that is since 2014, 2017 and 2017 respectively.


When considering all physicians, 7,354,492 gifts were declared for a total value of €818M (US$936M) from 2014 to 2019. The median value of a gift was €46 (IQR=25–60, US$54).

For most KOLs (83%), at least one gift was declared from 2014 to 2019. Gifts to KOLs represented 0.68% of the total number of physician gifts and 1.5% of the total value of gifts, that is, €12.3M (US$14M). This corresponds to a mean of €3700 in gifts per KOL per year. The median value of a KOL gift was €60 (IQR=30–214, US$71).

Overall, the gifts declared for all physicians decreased in number and value from 1.3M gifts (€125M) to 923,000 gifts (€108M).

The number, value and proportion of gifts declared for KOLs decreased from 9687 gifts (0.70% of the total number of gifts to physicians) to 6044 gifts (0.65% of the total number of gifts to physicians) and 6044 gifts (1.4% of the total value of gifts to physicians). The evolution year by year for each specific category of gift from 2014 to 2019 is presented in table 2.

Almost all (99%) associations had at least one board member for whom at least one gift had been declared since 2014. The median value of gifts declared for all the corresponding KOLs of a professional medical association was €61,000 (IQR=14,000–143,000; US$70,000) but varied widely between associations. For 1% of the associations, no gift had been declared for their KOLs. For 16%, gifts to their KOLs represented less than €1000 per year. For 39%, the value of gifts ranged between €10,000 and €50,000 and for 11%, more than €50,000 had been declared in gifts to their KOLs each year.

**Contractual agreements (2017–2019)**

For all physicians, 1.67 million contractual agreements were declared from 2017 to 2019 for a total of €125M (US$143M). For 1.28 million of these agreements (77%), the reported amount was null. A null amount can be explained either by a joint report in one of the two other categories (when the agreement is linked with a gift or remuneration) or by a wrong declaration.

Contractual agreements with KOLs represented 0.72% of all agreements declared for physicians and 2.5% of the value of these agreements, that is, €3M (US$3.6M). This corresponds to a mean of €1900 in declared agreements per KOL per year. For 9496 KOL agreements (79%), the reported amount was null.

Overall, contractual agreements declared for all physicians increased from €42M in 2017 to €43M in 2019. The evolution year by year of the total value and median value of agreements is presented in table 3.
### Table 2: Median (IQR) amount of gifts to KOL and non-KOL physicians in euros (€)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hospitality</td>
<td>All physicians</td>
<td>50 (27–118)</td>
<td>45 (25–60)</td>
<td>46 (24–60)</td>
<td>55 (30–60)</td>
<td>53 (28–60)</td>
<td>52 (28–60)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>KOL</td>
<td>70 (30–448)</td>
<td>58 (28.2–258)</td>
<td>60 (30–258)</td>
<td>80.5 (40–362)</td>
<td>60 (29–319)</td>
<td>60 (30–329)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>KOL</td>
<td>40 (23–59)</td>
<td>40 (23–59)</td>
<td>40 (23–58)</td>
<td>40 (23–58)</td>
<td>40 (24–59)</td>
<td>40 (24–59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td>All physicians</td>
<td>208 (91–420)</td>
<td>200 (88–398)</td>
<td>191 (85–380)</td>
<td>189 (79–357)</td>
<td>182 (81–344)</td>
<td>177 (77–332)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>KOL</td>
<td>202 (70–471)</td>
<td>206 (74.2–461)</td>
<td>244 (96–477)</td>
<td>207 (77–445)</td>
<td>198 (79.8–414)</td>
<td>187 (71–395)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contributions to the cost of</td>
<td>All physicians</td>
<td>60 (50–400)</td>
<td>60 (50–404)</td>
<td>60 (44–400)</td>
<td>200 (55–455)</td>
<td>400 (250–590)</td>
<td>440 (260–650)</td>
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<tr>
<td>promotional events</td>
<td>KOL</td>
<td>320 (60–591)</td>
<td>350 (60–600)</td>
<td>390 (87–650)</td>
<td>450 (186–729)</td>
<td>470 (290–740)</td>
<td>538 (290–796)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>KOL</td>
<td>83 (60–275)</td>
<td>68 (27.5–1578)</td>
<td>96 (63.5–138)</td>
<td>76 (45–192)</td>
<td>155 (42–225)</td>
<td>80 (42–180)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Service and consulting</td>
<td>All physicians</td>
<td>26 (22–30)</td>
<td>30 (22–45)</td>
<td>30 (24–50)</td>
<td>30 (25–40)</td>
<td>50 (25–80)</td>
<td>116 (40–362)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>All physicians</td>
<td>100 (30–350)</td>
<td>140 (30–496)</td>
<td>100 (19–375)</td>
<td>22 (16–84)</td>
<td>25 (16–104)</td>
<td>49 (16–220)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>KOL</td>
<td>337 (34.8–1000)</td>
<td>800 (195–1188)</td>
<td>700 (100–1000)</td>
<td>310 (23–915)</td>
<td>40 (12–153)</td>
<td>79.5 (12–500)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>All physicians</td>
<td>45 (25–60)</td>
<td>45 (25–60)</td>
<td>45 (25–60)</td>
<td>46 (25–60)</td>
<td>48 (25–60)</td>
<td>49 (26–60)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>KOL</td>
<td>59 (29–198)</td>
<td>60 (30–224)</td>
<td>60 (30–217)</td>
<td>60 (30–213)</td>
<td>60 (31–214)</td>
<td>60 (31–210)</td>
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</table>

KOL, key opinion leader.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Payment category</th>
<th>Physicians category</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2018</th>
<th>2019</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No of agreements for which the amount could not be found in the agreement section (percentage of the number of agreements)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Contractual agreements</td>
<td>All physicians</td>
<td>446204 (79%)</td>
<td>443687 (79%)</td>
<td>394393 (72%)</td>
<td>1284284</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>KOL</td>
<td>3514 (80%)</td>
<td>3319 (80%)</td>
<td>2663 (76%)</td>
<td>9496</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total value of agreements for which an amount could be found in the agreement section in €</td>
<td>42905877</td>
<td>39962079</td>
<td>43098150</td>
<td>125966106</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No of agreements with a declared amount in the agreement section</td>
<td>118860</td>
<td>119844</td>
<td>150987</td>
<td>389691</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>KOL</td>
<td>1123947</td>
<td>1040295</td>
<td>1000651</td>
<td>3164893</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No of agreements for which the amount could not be found in the agreement section (percentage of the number of agreements)</td>
<td>903</td>
<td>837</td>
<td>843</td>
<td>2583</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>KOL</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>1901</td>
<td>1876</td>
<td>5718</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Remunerations</td>
<td>All physicians</td>
<td>Total amount in €</td>
<td>49152264</td>
<td>53142546</td>
<td>54254342</td>
<td>156549152</td>
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<td></td>
<td>KOL</td>
<td>77277</td>
<td>77436</td>
<td>96160</td>
<td>250573</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total amount in €</td>
<td>2355894</td>
<td>2346293</td>
<td>2172827</td>
<td>6875014</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>KOL</td>
<td>946 (527–1440)</td>
<td>1000 (600–1497)</td>
<td>998 (538–1375)</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Median (IQR)</td>
<td>300 (65–750)</td>
<td>350 (65–800)</td>
<td>130 (50–613)</td>
<td>250</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No of remunerations</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>1901</td>
<td>1876</td>
<td>5718</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

KOL, key opinion leader.
The number, the value and the proportion of contractual agreements declared for KOLs decreased each year from 4400 agreements (0.78% of the number of agreements with physicians)/€1.1M (2.6% of the value of agreements with physicians) in 2017 to 3500 agreements (0.64% of the number of agreements with physicians)/€1M (2.3% of the value of agreements with physicians) in 2019. This evolution is depicted in figure 2.

The median value of contractual agreements declared for all the corresponding KOLs of an association was €15900 per year and also varied widely between associations (IQR=390–35 617).

Remunerations (2017–2019)
For all physicians, 250873 remunerations totaling €156M (US$178M) from 2017 to 2019. The median amount of a remuneration was €250 (IQR 55–742) (US$296). KOLs received 2.3% of physician remunerations, that is, €6.8M (US$7.8M) or 4.4% of the total value of remunerations to physicians. Overall, KOLs received four times more remunerations than other physicians, which represents a mean of €4100 in remunerations per KOL per year.

Regarding all physicians, remunerations increased in number and total value but the median amount decreased sharply. The evolution of the total amount of remunerations is presented in table 3. Physician remunerations increased from 77277 remunerations/€49M in 2017 to 96160 remunerations/€54M in 2019.

The number, value and proportion of remunerations declared for KOLs decreased each year from 2017 (1900 remunerations, 2.5% of the number of remunerations to physicians, accounting for €2.3M and 4.8% of the value of remunerations to physicians) to 2019 (1800 remunerations, 1.9% of the number of remunerations to physicians, accounting for €2.1M and 4% of the value of remunerations to physicians in 2019). The median amount of remunerations declared for all the corresponding KOLs of an association was €21000 per year and also varied widely between associations (IQR 1012–68 977, US$25 000).

DISCUSSION
Principal findings
From 2014 to 2019, €818M in gifts were declared for physicians in France. From 2017 to 2019, €125M in contractual agreements and €156M in remunerations were declared for physicians in France. The amount of gifts decreased while the total amount of declared contractual agreements and remunerations increased. Gifts represented the largest amount declared. 83% of the KOLs received at least one gift from the pharmaceutical industry from 2014 to 2019 for a total amount of €12.3M.

Almost every professional medical association included at least one KOL who had received one or more gifts since 2014 (99%) or 2017 (97%). Over the whole period, the median value of gifts per association was €61 000 (US$70 000).

Figure 2 Evolution of the three kinds of financial ties for key opinion leaders (KOLs) and all physicians. The gifts declared for all physicians decreased in number and value over time; the number, the value and the proportion of gifts declared for KOLs decreased. The contractual agreements declared for all physicians increased; the number, the value and the proportion of contractual agreements declared for KOLs decreased. The remunerations declared for all physicians increased; the number, the value and the proportion of remunerations declared for KOLs decreased. OL, opinion leader.
000). From 2017 to 2019, the median cumulative value for each professional medical association was €15 900 in contractual agreements and €21 900 in remunerations. The number and value of gifts, contractual agreements and remunerations for all the members of a single association varied widely from one association to another.

The number, value and proportion of gifts, contractual agreements and remunerations for KOLs slightly decreased over time. Remunerations represented the largest amount declared for KOLs with a median amount per capita four times higher than for other physicians. KOLs represented 0.24% of the physicians but were associated with 1.5% of the gifts, 2.4% of the contractual agreements and 4.4% of the remunerations in value. This represents €3 700 in gifts, €1 900 in agreements and €4 100 in remunerations per capita per year. The amount for contractual agreements is probably underestimated since 79% of KOL agreement amounts were declared null in the database (see above).

**Strengths and limitations**

This study is exhaustive of all ties declared in the French Transparency in Healthcare database. All physicians practising in France were included since declaration of industry ties is mandatory.

However, the results may be underestimated since many amounts for contractual agreements were not available. One reason for this is that when a physician signs an agreement conferring an advantage, the amount can be declared nil as a contractual agreement or a gift, or declared as both an agreement and a gift. There is no government control at this level.

The effect of this bias is difficult to predict. Either firms did not declare the amount of thousands of contractual agreements, thus underestimating the amounts received by physicians or the amount of an agreement could have been counted twice. The entire Eurofordocs database (with all beneficiaries, without time limitation) contains 5.5 million contractual agreements, 3.3 million of which have a nil amount. 2.2 million gifts are reported to be linked to an agreement but have an invalid textual link. There are, therefore, at least 1.1 million contractual agreements with a nil amount despite the legal obligation to declare them.

Another limitation lies in the fact that the data comes from the declarations of the pharmaceutical industry itself with typos. Moreover, there may be a delay in data reporting, and remunerations may have been misclassified as it was possible to declare them as gifts or as remunerations until October 2017.

Finally, in the absence of an official definition, we chose an objective but restrictive definition of a KOL which led us to rule out many individuals with great leverage who could also have been included as KOLs.

**Comparison with other studies**

Our results are in line with those observed worldwide but add new data regarding the French context. A very recent US study showed that nearly three-quarters of the leaders of the 10 most influential professional medical associations in the USA had ties with the pharmaceutical industry, with wide variations in the amount of payments reported between the professional medical associations.31 Total general payments of US$24.8M (€20.8M, £18.9M) were linked to the 235 KOLs of the 10 most influential professional medical associations over 3 years. The total median general payment was US$6 000 (IQR US$3 090–US$54 000) (€5 000, £4 500).

In the American study, KOLs received 10 times more per capita per year in total amount than the French KOLs, and more than 83 times more in terms of median amount.

The amounts involved in the American study seems to be much greater. This difference could be explained by societal differences but also by the fact that we included professional medical associations regardless of their size, cost or influence. The difference could also be explained by the fact that the USA has a population five times larger than France and has four times more physicians, which may represent an important return on investment. Finally, in the USA, there are more mandatory payments to report, and there are enforcement measures and effective penalties that do not exist in France.31

**Implications of this study**

Despite multiple calls for more distance,1 11 32–34 KOLs still have privileged relationships with the pharmaceutical industry. This phenomenon can lead to lower quality in guidelines and to a general loss of confidence in both KOLs and physicians. In recent years, several guidelines have been abrogated due to doubts about the independence of the experts involved in writing them.35–38

In turn, Chakroun et al have shown that disclosure of conflicts of interest reduces public and physician trust in KOLs.39 Experience shows that financial ties can also be instrumentalised to discredit any expert position, the link being used as an argument to call into question the scientific opinion.40–42

Our study’s finding of remaining concealments in the amounts of contractual agreements, despite the legal obligation to declare them, shows that transparency is still in progress and that both researchers and citizens do not yet have access to all the data. For us, the main area for improvement would be to make it mandatory to report the amount of gifts and remunerations conferred by a contractual agreement in the contractual agreement section. In addition, the declarations should be checked by the public authorities, which is the only way to guarantee the reliability of the information provided.

Future research might focus on the correlation between the amount of gifts and the medical specialty or the cost of the relevant diseases. Further research is needed to identify other kinds of KOLs such as the department heads of teaching hospitals, and medical university lecturers. Financial ties could be tracked over time, acting as a nudge to help chart moves towards independence.
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