Pneumococcal Vaccination Rates in Adults in Germany: An Analysis of Statutory Health Insurance Data on More Than 850 000 Individuals

by Ulrike Theidel, M.Sc., Alexander Kuhlmann, MSc, Dr. rer. nat. Anja Braem, PhD in volume 44/2013

**Reporting Guided by Competing Interests**

The entire research article as well as two of the three authors were funded by the vaccine manufacturers. Furthermore, the first author, Ms Theidel, is employed by a contract research organization that, according to its own website, provides “strategic consulting” to 48 pharmaceutical companies. Such conflicts of interest raise the probability that the authors will select positive study findings (1).

In this context the irrational focus on the vaccine Prevenar seems striking, for example. It is highly praised in the article, because “the success of conjugate vaccines is obvious in children,” although this is not the subject of the article (2). Another example for positive bias (too positive, in our opinion): “The restricted recommendation from the STIKO regarding the use of the pneumococcal conjugate vaccine in adults is viewed critically by experts [...]” The authors give preference to experts most of whom have received fees from Pfizer (http://erj.ersjournals.com/site/misc/statements39.xhtml; http://data.aerzteblatt.de/pdf/103/24/ai690.pdf) over a consensus-based STIKO recommendation (3), which, by contrast, takes a critical view of Prevenar. The message of the results in the abstract, “According to an optimistic estimate, the percentage of pneumococcal vaccination in the overall population is 3.75% [...]” was chosen in error, as in the general methods and assumptions for a study are explained in a transparent view of Prevenar. We further think that as a consequence, persons with serious conflicts of interest should be excluded as authors in future. The **Lancet** already does this, at least in partial areas, in order to improve the scientific quality of the publication.

DOI: 10.3238/arztebl.2014.0250a

**REFERENCES**


**In Reply:**

We are pleased that our article has resonated with so many readers. The article’s subject is the situation regarding pneumococcal vaccination in adults in general and reflects current recommendations. Unfortunately, the authors of the letter to the editor seem to have succumbed to misinterpretations regarding our assumptions and terminology. The term “overall population,” for example, in the model relates exclusively to age groups ≥18 that are vaccinated according to the STIKO scheme—and therefore not everyone aged 18 or older, as the authors imply. With regard to existing conflicts of interest we wish to point out that it is recognized and common practice in clinical research for research projects to receive “external” funding. It seems obvious that researchers (even high ranking ones who publish in The Lancet) receive funding—and mostly from commercial enterprises. The decisive issue here is how to deal with transparency.

All participating authors sent in their competing interests statements according to the standard required by Deutsches Ärzteblatt (DÄ), so that editors/publishers and readers are provided with the greatest possible transparency. The DÄ’s standards conform to the international approach in spelling out conflicts of interests. These are subject to a continuing process of improvement—as is common in the development of templates, standards, or guidelines. Listing potential conflicts of interest aims to support readers in making up their own minds as to how they want to rate the quality and meaningfulness of studies. If the general methods and assumptions for a study are explained in a transparent manner, it is up to the informed reader to make up his or her mind regarding the credibility.

For this reason we gained the impression when reading our correspondents’ letter that it was more a general comment on the subject of “conflicts of interest in medicine,” rather than a technical expert discussion on the topic of vaccination rates.

DOI: 10.3238/arztebl.2014.0250b

**REFERENCES**


On behalf of the authors:

Ulrike Theidel, M.Sc.
Herescon GmbH, Hannover
theidel@herescon.com

**Conflict of interest statement**

The authors of both contributions declare that no conflict of interest exists.

Dr. Niklas Schurig, Bietigheim, Vorstandsmitglied MEZIS e.V.

schurig@mezis.de

Coauthors in alphabetical order:
Anton J. Beck, Rottenburg
Dr. Hannes Blankenfeld, München
Manja Dannenberg, Neubukow, Vorstandsmitglied MEZIS e.V.
Dr. Michael Freitag, Weimar
Dr. Martin Hirte, München
Dr. Vanadis Kamm-Kohl, Nürnberg

as well as 9 further signatories