

# Research, transparency and conflicts of interest



Is transparency a sufficient safeguard against bias? We have asked the *Lancet* to review the effectiveness of its conflicts of interest policy, given that two lead authors of its series on *Maternal and Child Nutrition*, published in June 2013,<sup>1</sup> declared that they are members of Nestlé's *Creating Shared Value Advisory Committee*. Such advisory roles could, depending on the circumstance, result in exclusion from European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) working groups.

Here is an email correspondence with Janet Voute, Nestlé's Vice President, Global Head of Public Affairs, asking about the financial remuneration made to CSV Committee members. We have since written to Nestlé's CEO to see if he will answer our simple question.

**1**  
**From:** Patti Rundall  
**Sent:** 12 February 2014  
**From:** Janet Voute

*Dear Janet, ... [In previous correspondence] you say that Nestle does not pay a 'salary' [to CSV Global Council members]. However, in the interests of transparency, can you confirm that they do not receive a fee, honorarium or financial or other compensation of any kind from Nestle? Thanks very much... On another point I notice that the list and profiles of the CSV Council members seems to have disappeared from the website. Could you explain this?...Patti*

**2**  
**From:** Janet Voute  
**Sent:** 12 February 2014  
**To:** Patti Rundall

*Dear Patti, As I said before, our CSV Council members do not receive a salary from Nestlé. Also we are presently reviewing the charter for this group. Once this is done, we will make additional information publicly available. I can't unfortunately give you a specific date as to when the information will be published. We are also in the process of preparing the 2013 Nestlé in Society: Creating Shared Value report for release in time for the Annual General Meeting. This explains any temporary changes in the website. Will we have the pleasure of your company again? Do you think you might try to say something positive for once?...Janet*

**3**  
**From:** Patti Rundall  
**Sent:** 13 February 2014  
**From:** Janet Voute

*Dear Janet.... Sorry. This maybe a language issue but my understanding of the word 'salary' is quite different from my understanding of the word "fee" "honorarium" or other financial compensation. So if you could clarify your response on this particular point it would be very helpful. Many thanks... Patti*

**4**  
**From:** Janet Voute  
**Sent:** 14 February 2014  
**To:** Patti Rundall

*Hi Patti, Our CSV Council members do not receive a salary from Nestlé. One thought for the day...if you wish to create positive change in an industry then you need to work with the industry leader. I am sure that you fundamentally disagree but I thought it was worth a try..... Janet*

The *Lancet* Child Survival series has an important influence on health policies. In 2003 it concluded that breastfeeding topped the list of interventions to prevent under-5 deaths. While the 2013 Series still recognises breastfeeding's importance, there is now much more emphasis on micronutrient-based foods and supplements. 8 of the 10 recommended intervention packages involve products of some kind. The private sector is also called on to generate 'evidence about the positive and negative effects of private sector and market-led approaches to nutrition.'

In November, Richard Horton, the Editor of the *Lancet*, Tweeted the following questions:

*Can anyone out there give me evidence about Nestlé's negative influences in health? Opinions are strong, and that's fine, but I need facts.... the power of big food: a few corporate conglomerates shape the way you live your life. How do we resist?*

Among those who responded was Prof Anthony Costello who asked:

*"Maybe one way to resist big food is not to have members of Nestlé's advisory board directing the *Lancet* Nutrition Series"*