

Lancetgate: Hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) to Treat Covid-19 Patients. Why Was this “Monumental Fraud” Not a Huge Scandal?

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A high-profile and highly influential scientific [study](#) regarding the potential of hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) to treat Covid-19 patients was [retracted](#) among suggestions of [fraud](#) back in June. The research in question was headed by a renowned Harvard professor called Mandeep Mehra and published by The Lancet, the most prestigious medical journal in the world.

It concluded that the antimalarial drug used since the 1950's was actually [killing](#) Covid-19 patients by inducing heart failures. It caused quite a stir. (Brief historical fact: the [Quina](#) tree, the source of quinine and its family of medications, is also the “national tree” of Peru).

Short after the publication of the study (22 May), the World Health Organization (WHO) [halted](#) all research being conducted on hydroxychloroquine, which included simultaneous testing in [17 countries](#). The worldwide influence of the scientific paper – and the fact that hundreds of doctors were [already trying](#) the drug in Covid-19 patients – led a lot of researchers to look closely into it, immediately finding an alarming level of incoherence.

In the meantime, the news was [spread](#) far and wide by the [corporate](#) media, many times in a highly [politicized](#) fashion. They swiftly convinced the world of the danger of treating the symptoms of Sars-Cov-2 with HCQ.

In the realm of social media, a wave of [censorship](#) against dissenting voices soon followed. A viral [video](#) showing a group of physicians called the Frontline Doctors, speaking publicly in favor of HCQ – by sharing their own clinical experience – was [removed](#) by most social media giants (but only after [millions](#) had already watched it). Could a testimony taken from a physician's own experience be called “[false](#)”? Of course! Today a handful of social media corporations control what we can say or hear.

Instead of informing their audiences with a balanced discussion about all the scientific research conducted so far regarding the drug, both [positive](#) and [negative](#), corporate media directed a barrage of [ad-hominems](#) and [smear](#) toward the mentioned doctors. An [army](#) of “fact-checkers” was opportunely deployed after that to police the web and [reassure](#) everyone that HCQ is both useless and dangerous. Everyone who said otherwise was snake oil peddler.

But regardless of its massive [political effect](#), the study wasn't a particularly well-crafted fraud to begin with. A couple of weeks after the publication, *The Lancet* received a [letter](#) from more than a hundred physicians and researchers, jointly demanding a review of the

study and the disclosure of the raw data used in it. When the company providing such data – Surgisphere – refused to relinquish it for independent inquiry, [three of its four authors](#) retracted the paper.

[Dr. Sapan Desai](#) was the one who didn't retract it, as he is (or was) the owner of Surgisphere and the provider of the data. It was allegedly obtained from 96,000 patients in hundreds of hospitals from five continents, a presumption that, according to many experts, should've immediately raised eyebrows. An expert in data integration projects [told](#) *The Guardian* that a database like the one Desai is said to own was “almost certainly a scam”.

Surgisphere's website, just like Dr. Desai himself, vanished soon after the fraud was revealed, while its few [employees](#), among them an adult content model and a sci-fi writer, appear to be no more than part of a façade.

Among the [observations](#) made to the retracted paper by the researchers were these pearls: “A range of gross deviations from standard research and clinical practices”; “gross misrepresentation of the numbers of (Covid-19) deaths in Australia”. The data was not only very hard to obtain, due to very different country laws and levels of development, it showed suspiciously similar tendencies despite focusing on very dissimilar regions of the Earth.

According to *Science* magazine, it was the presence of Mandeep Mehra what gave the study the “[gravitas](#)” needed to be published in a medical journal as *The Lancet*. He did retract it and apologize as soon as the news about the refusal to open the data was out. Mehra and Desai were [introduced](#) to one another by a third researcher, Dr. Amit Patel, who also participated in the retracted paper. Patel and Desai are also brothers-in-law.

Edward Horton, *The Lancet*'s editor in chief, [said](#) that the whole thing was a “monumental fraud”. A Bostonian research scientist writing for *The Guardian*, James Heathers, [called it](#) “the most important retraction in modern history”. Heathers correctly pointed out that “studies like this determine how people live or die tomorrow”. Sadly, “saving people's lives” is also used as a [justification](#) for giving dubious science a free pass in times of emergency.

Despite the fact that the malign influence of private interests in science research and medicine is quite [well-known](#) and [documented](#) today, the few corporate news outlets that covered “Lancetgate” decided not to look into the obvious...

A world of conflicts of interest

In opposition to the coverage given to the original study, its retraction wasn't as widely and swiftly publicized by the mainstream press. In fact, other than *The Guardian*, only a few news media covered this historic scientific embarrassment in any depth.

When they did, they rarely went beyond mentioning “[data concerns](#)”. But that could be understood as anything from a computer virus destroying part of the data to legitimate human error. Not many hints were given to the readers to let them suspect of deliberate and outright fraud, much less one rooted in conflicts of interest.

The spin given to the news was not much about why or how it happened – how reputed scientists and *The Lancet* were fooled by fake data – but mostly about how bad it looked for everyone and how the need for remedies for the pandemic was driving scientists and regulatory bodies to bypass important scrutiny.

A *New York Times* [op-ed](#) went deep into the problems in the peer review system, a process both “opaque and fallible”, going as far as to acknowledge a “politicization of the pandemic”, but it failed miserably by not informing its readers of one of the reasons why peer review might fail: conflicts of interest.

Where’s the relationship between this incident and the pervasive role of Big Pharma’s money in academia, science and politics?

The many flaws quickly pointed out by more than a hundred scientists didn’t make the press question how a reputed and seasoned researcher like Harvard’s Mehra was so easily fooled, and then *The Lancet* and its peer review system. The *Guardian* didn’t look deep, or at all, into potential conflicts of interests involving the researchers in question and Big Pharma.

As you probably know already, the way pharmaceutical giants make their money is through patents – the monopoly to market a certain drug for a certain time – and hydroxychloroquine lost any patent it had decades ago. As Marcia Angell [wrote](#) in 2002:

Patents are the lifeblood of the drug industry. Without a patent, a company has no incentive to bring a drug to market.

As the Alliance for Human Research Protection correctly [pointed out](#), “...mainstream media carefully avoid asking the... overriding question, lest the magnitude of science fraud is laid bare”.

And the question regarded specific and flagrant conflicts of interest. The independent media didn’t miss it. As Professor Michel Chossudovsky [wrote](#) for *Global Research* (June 10):

The Lancet acknowledges that the study received funding from the William Harvey Distinguished Chair in Advanced Cardiovascular Medicine at Brigham and Women’s Hospital which is held by Dr. Mandeep Mehra. In this regard, it is worth noting that Brigham Health has a major contract with Big Pharma’s Gilead Sciences Inc., related to the development of the Remdesivir drug for the treatment of COVID-19. The Gilead-Brigham Health project was initiated in March 2020.

The mandatory question right after acknowledging Gilead’s relationship with said Hospital, one that the corporate media could never dare ask, also made by Prof. Chossudovsky, is if the fraudulent study was made “to provide a justification to block the use of HCQ”?

The reason behind this mainstream media omission could be found in the [billions](#) of dollars the pharma industry spends in advertising, the “lifeblood” of corporate news, which predisposes them to naivety and simple-mindedness regarding possible conflicts of interest. Seems logical, they are in the exact same spot as the researchers who take Big Pharma money and then are supposed to pass objective judgment about their products and questionable [role](#) in society.

Add to that the fact that media and pharmaceutical corporations share [interlocking directorates](#). As FAIR.org reported back in 2009, media names like *The New York Times* or the NBC share directors with companies like Eli Lilly or Merck, respectively.

A consequence of decades of conflicts of interest corrupting traditional media is that today most people is dangerously uninformed of the risks of letting the group of corporations that comprise Big Pharma, and their hedge fund [shareholders](#), wield its [power](#) over both governments and science. Even today, many people are prone to call Big Pharma influence a “[conspiracy theory](#)”.

The mere idea that Big Pharma’ influence could be swaying what is being said and done politically and in the realm of corporate media, regarding the Cov-Sars-2 pandemic and potential remedies, is utterly outrageous! The fact that they [spend](#) as no other industry in government lobbying and media advertising doesn’t seem to matter because, well, how could Big Pharma be worried of anything else but our health in these times of great despair... right?

In fact, both Big Media and Big Pharma are motivated by profit, and they are partners in crime, as members of the latter have been “repeatedly [convicted](#) of marketing harmful—often fatal—drugs; substantial fraud; price manipulation; and concealment of evidence.”

Their managers are legally forced to enrich their shareholder masters without regards for “externalities”, like an opioid overdose crisis. A pandemic is seen by these huge psychopathic entities just as a once in a lifetime opportunity to plunder. A desperate consumer is a great costumer, especially when Gilead, Novartis, AstraZeneca and the rest of the bunch can spend his or her [taxes](#) in disproportionately expensive remedies because they [own](#) the government bodies made to regulate them.

Advertising money is the reason why a critical look into this world of conflicts of interests is completely absent from mainstream media, even if “progressive” as *The Guardian*.

In addition to this, you have probably heard a lot lately about how fake news and conspiracy theories are a “threat to democracy”, or how they “undermine traditional institutions”. Well, giving wide coverage to a fraud involving top Western scientists and doctors, using the most important medical journal ever known to the effect of discarding a cheap drug with no patents and a potential competitor for expensive pharma company products, can produce some serious “undermining” of public trust.

We should end this article by quoting some worried –and sometimes pessimistic– scientific authors. Among them the editors or former editors of *The Lancet* and *The New England Journal of Medicine*.

“A turn to towards darkness”

Regarding the nefarious role of commercial conflicts of interest in science, Marcia Angell, quoted above, also [wrote](#) this in 2009:

It is simply no longer possible to believe much of the clinical research that is published, or to rely on the judgment of trusted physicians or authoritative medical guidelines. I take no pleasure in this conclusion, which I reached slowly and reluctantly over my two decades as editor of *The New England Journal of Medicine* (NEJM).

Recently (not under Angell’s editorship), the NEJM –second in prestige only to *The Lancet*–

also published and [retracted](#) research by Mehra and Desai.

The editor of *The Lancet*, Dr. Richard Horton, also seems to have [lost faith](#) in what is nowadays called scientific research:

The case against science is straightforward: much of the scientific literature, perhaps half, may simply be untrue. Afflicted by studies with small sample sizes, tiny effects, invalid exploratory analyses, and flagrant conflicts of interest, together with an obsession for pursuing fashionable trends of dubious importance, science has taken a turn towards darkness.

Are we going back to the Dark Ages, or are we there already? In France, the former Health Minister, Philippe Douste-Blazy, [leaked](#) an extraordinary anecdote from a private reunion he had with the editors of *The Lancet*, other journals and experts, to French news medium BFMtv.

According to Douste-Blazy, Richard Horton (*The Lancet*) literally said:

If this continues, we are not going to be able to publish any more clinical research data because pharmaceutical companies are so financially powerful today, and are able to use such methodologies as to have us accept papers which are apparently methodologically perfect, but which, in reality, manage to conclude what they want to conclude.

“When there is an outbreak like Covid, in reality, there are people like us – doctors – who see mortality and suffering... and there are people who see dollars. That’s it,” admitted the French physician.

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