

OPINION**Was the swine flu a fake pandemic?**By [Ray Moynihan](#)

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The Australian Government stockpiled Tamiflu (Reuters: Tim Wimborne, file photo)

It's a year since the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared a global pandemic of swine flu, triggering health emergencies across the planet.

But instead of accolades, the WHO and authorities everywhere are facing an avalanche of disturbing questions about the handling of the swine flu, and the influence of vested interests.

To put the key question most crudely: was the world wrongly persuaded to believe it was in the grip of a ghastly and severe pandemic by decision-making bodies unduly influenced by pharmaceutical companies hoping to sell billions of dollars worth of vaccines and anti-viral drugs?

A [report just out from the Council of Europe](#) has come to some devastating conclusions. The declaration of a pandemic led to a "waste of huge sums of public money", a "distortion of priorities" in public health services, the "provocation of unjustified fear" and the "creation of health risks through vaccines and medications" that may not have been sufficiently tested.

Clearly any untimely death is a tragedy, but from early on it looked like H1N1 was a relatively moderate strain of influenza, though it could be unusually harmful for certain groups. And the global death toll is in the thousands not the predicted millions. But governments in many places have been left with contracts for millions of doses of vaccines now going to waste.

A series of investigations have been launched into how authorities handled swine flu, with the damning Council of Europe report one of the first completed. It originated from a motion tabled in the 47 nation Parliamentary Assembly titled, "Faked pandemics- a threat for health."

It identifies three key problems: first, WHO's excessive response and pandemic declaration; second, excessive secrecy surrounding decision-making; and third, the possibility of undue influence by drug companies through financial ties to key decision-makers.

The report explains that the WHO description of the definition of a "pandemic" was actually changed in May 2009, *after* the first cases of swine flu were reported. The change seems to have removed the requirement that a virus's impact be severe, before a pandemic was declared.

The report cites concerns within the scientific community that the WHO rapidly moved towards declaring "pandemic level 6" in June, 2009, when swine flu presented "relatively mild symptoms". It went on to state that the declaration of the pandemic was only made possible by "changing the definition" and by "lowering the threshold for its declaration."

But it was this all-important declaration which triggered pre-pandemic planning that would prove highly lucrative to industry: "pharmaceutical companies had a strong vested interest in the declaration of a pandemic" the report states.

At the same time, the membership list of the WHO's 16-member "Emergency Committee", instrumental in declaring the pandemic, remains secret - a lack of transparency strongly attacked by the report.

Last week the [British Medical Journal](#), (*BMJ*) published its own journalistic investigation, revealing that specialists with financial links to the drug industry were intimately involved in WHO pre-pandemic planning. For example, the WHO guidance for anti-viral medicines, including Roche's Tamiflu, "was authored by an influenza expert who at the same time was receiving payments from Roche." *BMJ* also exposed the identities of three members of the secret "Emergency Committee", including one with financial ties to the pharmaceutical industry.

As part of the call for a major clean-up, both the *BMJ* and the Council of Europe want health decision-making bodies to be entirely free of members with financial ties to drug makers.

Chairman of Australia's Influenza Specialist Group (ISG) Alan Hampson, says such a reform is "unnecessary", and "unachievable", because so many experts have ties to drug-makers. As an example, the ISG is 100 percent funded by drug and device companies, yet chair Alan Hampson says he sits on a number of committees offering advice to the Australian government, including on swine flu.

The WHO strongly rejects that decisions were unduly influenced, though it has commenced a high-level external investigation. Even Australia has a review, though not an external public inquiry.

The Council of Europe report found "overwhelming evidence that the seriousness of the pandemic was vastly overrated" at the outset. Indeed, very early on there was a private view among elites that even if swine flu wasn't so serious, it was a good test run. The exercise has certainly proved lucrative to industry, but at what cost to the credibility of agencies supposed to be protecting public health, not promoting private wealth.

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