

Doctors told to disclose drugs firm cash with gifts on rise

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By Henry Bodkin

CASH and hospitality given to doctors by the pharmaceutical industry has risen to more than £116million a year, according to latest figures, yet many clinicians are still refusing to disclose how much they get.

Campaigners have described as "ridiculous" the figures, which show that at least one in three clinicians who takes money or gifts from drug companies is still refusing to publicly disclose their extra earnings.

There were calls for a change in the law to force doctors to publish all potential conflicts of interest.

The data were released by the Association of British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI), which last year set up a database of payments and benefits in kind.

The register, known as Disclosure UK, was established after a *Daily Telegraph* investigation into industry practices triggered non-statutory changes in NHS rules.

It showed that the amount of non-R&D cash and benefits in kind paid to healthcare professionals in 2016 rose by seven per cent on 2015.

It includes consultancy payments to NHS and private doctors, nurses and pharmacists to help firms set up clinical trials or design promotional literature, as well as costs for travel, hotels, dinners and events.

Although the ABPI is able to tell what money is paid by pharmaceutical companies and to whom, in order to make public the names of doctors who have received money, those doctors have

to give their consent. The NHS has called on pharmaceutical companies to refuse to pay practitioners unless they agree to publicly disclose their earnings.

But the ABPI yesterday resisted calls to pressure their members to do so.

Mike Thompson, the chief executive, said there was no hiding of bad practice and that the number of clinicians responding to the drive for greater transparency has risen from 55 per cent in 2015 to 65 per cent in 2016.

The data showed that those clinicians who did disclose the money and hospitality they had received tended to earn about 20 per cent less than their colleagues who refused to do so.

Patient Concern, a patients' group, said the public had a right to know about a doctor's potential conflict of interest and called for the law to be changed if the number refusing to disclose their earnings remained high.

Dr Ben Goldacre, a senior clinical research fellow at Oxford University and the author of *Bad Science*, said: "Of course, just because you take money it doesn't mean you are corrupt, but it is a risk and it should be openly declared so that others can assess it."

The data comprises payments made by 115 pharmaceutical companies in 2016, who on average paid out around £4million, although one firm paid £56million in the year. A spokesman for NHS England said its "new strengthened guidance" makes clear "what behaviour is and is not acceptable".