Emails Reveal Journal's Internal Discussions Before Rejecting Challenge to Pfizer's Effectiveness Claim

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Officials at a major journal discussed a professor's alleged anti-vaccine Twitter activity when considering whether to publish his paper challenging the claim that Pfizer's vaccine was 95 percent effective, newly disclosed emails show.

The Lancet journal ultimately rejected the rebuttal paper.

Professor Norman Fenton "retweeted anti-vaxx posts on Twitter,"

one Lancet official wrote to colleagues.

They also discussed "vaccine misinformation" and Fenton's background, the heavily redacted emails show.

"[redacted] have investigated him a little and he does seem to have a legitimate academic appointment," reads one email, titled "Ongoing issues monitoring."

Fenton, emeritus professor of risk at Queen Mary University of London, obtained the emails from Elsevier, which publishes The Lancet.

"We knew that all the main academic journals were routinely rejecting any articles that were in any way questioning the accuracy of studies claiming vaccine effectiveness or safety. What surprised even us about this case was the sheer nastiness and lack of professionalism displayed by the journal's editorial staff," Fenton told The Epoch Times via email.

"The notion that authors' academic credentials and Twitter activities had to be investigated as part of the reviewing process is shocking."

The Lancet didn't respond to a request for comment.

Effectiveness Claim

In May 2021, The Lancet published a paper from Israeli officials and Pfizer employees that claimed that the company's vaccine was 95 percent effective against COVID-19 infection in Israel from Jan. 24, 2021, to April 3, 2021.

The study analyzed surveillance data drawn from government-funded insurance providers. Pfizer and Israel entered into multiple agreements early in the pandemic that saw the country primarily use the company's vaccine and share data with the firm.

The study shows that two doses of Pfizer's vaccine were "highly effective" across all age groups 16 and older in preventing symptomatic COVID-19, asymptomatic COVID-19, COVID-19-related hospitalization, severe disease, and death, researchers said in the study, which was peer-reviewed before publication.

"These findings suggest that COVID-19 vaccination can help to control the pandemic," they said.

The study was funded by the Israeli Ministry of Health and Pfizer.

Rebuttal

The effectiveness estimates were exaggerated, Fenton and Martin Neil, a professor of computer science and statistics at Queen Mary of London, wrote in a rapid response to the paper.

That stemmed in part from adjusting for how unvaccinated people were routinely tested for COVID-19 while vaccinated people weren't, the professors said.

"There is also failure to properly adjust for the different testing protocols for vaccinated and unvaccinated people," they wrote.

The Lancet told the professors that they were waiting to hear from the paper's authors before publishing the rebuttal.

No further correspondence was sent until January 2023.

Apology

Josefine Gibson, a senior editor at The Lancet, wrote in a Jan. 8, 2023, email that she saw that the submitted rebuttal hadn't been published.

"We had invited Dr. Sharon Alroy-Preis and co-authors of the published article to consider your letter, but I am sorry that we never received a formal reply from them and therefore have not been able to pursue an exchange," Gibson wrote.

Alroy-Preis is a top Israeli Ministry of Health official.

"But I am even more sorry that I didn't communicate a decision with you in a timely manner. I will now close your submission, but I thank you for supporting post-publication debate in The Lancet," Gibson wrote.

Fenton released the email online, triggering a flood of criticism of the decision to not publish the rebuttal. He and Neil also noted that Alroy-Preis had declared no conflicts of interest, despite Israeli health officials entering into the collaboration that outlined a close partnership.

"The world relied heavily on a major Israeli study in the Lancet which confirmed Pfizer vaccine efficiency, but the lead author failed to declare her conflict of interest in which she signed a contract not to release information detrimental to Pfizer's product without their permission," Fenton and Neil wrote in a blog post.

The criticism triggered another message from Gibson, who said The Lancet was "looking into next steps" regarding the rebuttal.

Offer of Publication

After Fenton highlighted what had happened to Richard Horton, The Lancet's editor-in-chief, Gibson told him that she wanted to apologize "for the substandard experience you've had with the Lancet."

"Having discussed this unfortunate situation with my Editor in Chief, Richard Horton, I would like to offer publication of your original letter. Alternatively, we could publish a new letter that reflects more a current experience with the Pfizer vaccine. We defer to your best judgment of what would best serve the medical community," she said. "We very much hope you'll accept this offer."

Fenton and Neil penned an updated rebuttal, which concluded that the Pfizer–Israel study should be retracted due to reasons including the undeclared conflict from Alroy-Preis and the failure to adjust for different testing protocols. They also raised concerns about adverse reactions to the vaccine, which they said are now known to be "substantial."

Gibson rejected the updated rebuttal.

"Given existing evidence about the effectiveness and safety of the Pfizer vaccine, it is factually incorrect—indeed, it is misinformation—to say that reported adverse reactions are 'substantial,'" she wrote.

The Lancet also doesn't consider Alroy-Preis's job at the Israeli Ministry of Health to be an undeclared conflict of interest, Gibson said.

New Emails

The situation prompted Fenton to seek internal correspondence regarding him.

The emails were prompted by Fenton's publication of Gibson's apology letter.

The tranche was heavily redacted but did show how officials considered public statements about the vaccine.

"Both Fenton [redacted] have retweeted anti-vaxx posts on Twitter, and their Substack articles are worth a scan," one email stated, referring to Fenton and Neil. "[redacted] experts to determine if Fenton's original letter and his criticisms of the article are valid and meet our publication standards."

The email recommended holding off on further correspondence with Fenton until confirming redacted information, "especially given that anything you say directly to Fenton has the potential to be shared."

In another missive, officials said there had been new developments in "the Fenton Twitter case," including an additional post by Fenton and "helpful background on Fenton." The rest of the email was redacted.

That's when officials said Fenton had been investigated and found

to have "a legitimate academic appointment." Officials also said that "[redacted] a source of vaccine misinformation is an academic prof based right around the corner from our Lancet offices."

Officials then proposed what ended up being the final response that rejected the updated submission. They revised the response to change "associated adverse reactions" to "reported adverse reactions."

Unhappy With Redactions

Fenton said many of the redactions appeared unnecessary and that he has asked Elsevier to remove them.

"I am not happy about the scale of the redactions in the Elsevier response. If the Lancet editors were not making disparaging comments about me and colleagues, then there should be no reason to redact them. What do they have to hide?" he wrote on Substack.

"The Lancet are hiding their internal correspondence relating to the submission (and ultimate rejection) of our letter criticising Pfizer," Neil wrote on Twitter. "They are however happy to let us know that they think of us as 'anti-vaxxers' and 'misinformation spreaders'!"

Fenton said he had informed Elsevier that if it didn't remove many of the redactions, he would report them to the Information Commissioner's Office.

Elsevier didn't respond to a request for comment.