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Sir,

In September, following the French Ministry of Health's initiative, an international consensus conference on the vaccination against hepatitis B was held in Paris. As expected, the recommendations of the panel promoted a reinforcement of vaccinations measures esp. in newborn, in spite of a worrying multiplication of publications on *paediatric* multiple sclerosis, a very unusual pathological entity prior to mass vaccination against hepatitis B, and whereas the results of the first study showing a clear increase in the relative risk of multiple sclerosis following this vaccination are expected [1]. Even before their public release, these conclusions were preventively criticised (*Libération*, 10/09/03) since, although placed under the responsibility of ANAES (the French Agency for accreditation and health assessment), this conference was organised in a complete scorn of the general procedures published by this Agency for meetings like this one and an impressive opacity concerning the conflicts of interests of the invited speakers.

P. Van Damme is a case in point: organiser of the Cannes' international congress "Action towards Control of Hepatitis B as a community Health Risk" (Cannes, 22-24 Nov 1993) which exerted a paramount influence on subsequent French vaccine policy, he opened this past meeting on behalf of the *Viral Hepatitis Prevention Board* presented as an "independent, international, multidisciplinary group of experts" (*Vaccine*, 1995; vol. 13, suppl 1, p. S5) without any clear mention of the facts that this group was created and sponsored by the manufacturers (*SCRIP* 1997, n° 2288, p. 22) and that a number of these "experts" had no clearer qualification to

participate than being their employees. Likewise, in the successive programs of the recent consensus conference, P. Van Damme was first presented as an “epidemiologist, WHO collaborating Center for Control and Prevention of Viral Hepatitis, Antwerp”, and he finally appeared with the following affiliation: “Public health and social medicine, WHO collaborating Center for Control and Prevention of Viral Hepatitis, Antwerp University”. It would be crucial to understand why French parents had to be kept in ignorance of details naturally given to *The Lancet* readers within the same period, namely: “many authors were principal investigators in vaccine trials and acted as advisers to pharmaceutical companies (...) The chairman of the group, P. Van Damme, has done vaccine trials for several vaccine manufacturers (...)” [2]

Sincerely

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[1] Hernan MA, Jick SS, Olek MJ, Ascherio A, Jick H. Recombinant hepatitis B vaccine and the risk of multiple sclerosis. *Pharmacoepidemiology and Drug Safety* 2003; 12: S59-S60

[2] Van Damme P, Banatvala J, Fay O, Iwarson S, McMahon B, Van Herck K et al. Hepatitis A booster vaccination: is there a need? *Lancet* 2003; 362: 1065-71