



The BMJ, London, UK

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Published: 29 March 2022

Crowdfunding investigative journalism at *The BMJ*

Expanding our impact through donations

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The BMJ is now more than a scholarly journal, and for the past decade we have pursued investigative journalism as a powerful lever for improving health by exposing failings in the system.¹ Over the past year we have substantially expanded our coverage, publishing 16 investigative stories ([bmj.com/investigations](https://www.bmj.com/investigations)), including a series that won a British Journalism Award,² and worked with a greater number of international journalists.

We have reported the disclosures of a whistleblower working on the Pfizer covid-19 vaccine trial,³ a story that unexpectedly led us to confront Facebook over the way it deals with misinformation on its platform.⁴ We have probed the implications of mRNA instability in vaccines and asked serious questions about Russia's Sputnik vaccine.^{5,6} Beyond covid, we have tackled concerns in global health, including polio eradication, and asked whether health institutions should still be investing in fossil fuels.^{7,8}

In a world marred by crises, investigative journalism is more important than ever. Vested interests are undermining clinical care and scientific integrity. Medical products of questionable benefit are widely used. Equitable healthcare is undermined by systemic injustices, a society fractured by deep social divisions, and faltering trust in traditional institutions.

Too much medical reporting today is produced quickly and driven by press releases, leading journalism away from its critical traditions of objectivity and challenging authority. In our view, investigative journalism is a powerful force for change that thrusts a problem into the spotlight and keeps it there until meaningful reform happens.

Role of journals

Journalism may seem like the job of newspapers, but medical journals have a vital part to play. At *The BMJ*, we externally peer review our journalism and often seek commentaries and further analysis on our findings. The approach strengthens our reporting and, by directly reaching health professionals, policy makers, and civil society, can drive real change.

The BMJ's journalism conforms to the highest standards. It must be accurate, relevant to our broad readership, and true to our values of being evidence based, patient centred, open and transparent, and courageous. Our purpose, as with our other content, is to create a healthier world by improving outcomes related to health and wellbeing for people and the planet.

Producing high impact investigations is slow and expensive. Many leads do not pan out. Other story ideas may come to us in a complex, somewhat convoluted form and can require great effort just to

unpick and fully understand. The full operation involves a team of journalists, editors, lawyers, and expert reviewers. At present, we cannot tackle all the potential stories that come across our desk or dedicate time to follow up published stories.

To grow, we need further financial support beyond the investment already made by *The BMJ*. In the past two years, we have secured no-strings philanthropic funding from Arnold Ventures, a US based organisation, and William McGuire, a former health executive. This generous funding has enabled us to begin scaling up the BMJ Investigations Unit, doubling in size by hiring a new editor and reporter, as well as growing our international pool of freelance investigative journalists. Funding also helps make investigations freely available.

But there are many more stories that need to be written, and it will take substantial new funds to recruit the additional journalists, data scientists, and fact checkers to meet our ambition of producing 10 major stories a year. This is where we hope that our readers will be able to help. While we will continue to seek out large philanthropic donations, *The BMJ* is also considering a crowdfunding model to raise small donations, up to a predefined limit, from readers around the world. These donations will be ringfenced to support investigative journalism. The editorial team will not be privy to the names of those who donate through the online mechanism. Those wishing to make a large donation are encouraged to speak to us directly.

This is the same crowdfunding model used by Wikipedia, the *Guardian*, and many other media outlets. We require any funder or donor to maintain a strict "hands-off" policy with regard to our investigative journalism. *The BMJ's* investigative journalism is striking a chord, with record breaking traffic to [bmj.com](https://www.bmj.com), reaching an audience often way beyond our traditional readership. It is clear that our work is filling an unmet need that perhaps only a medical journal with a focus on investigative journalism can achieve. We'd welcome your thoughts on our plans.

Competing interests: See <https://www.bmj.com/about-bmj/editorial-staff/> for full disclosures.

Provenance and peer review. Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

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