



Not all lobbying is bad: Flaherty

Ex-aide to PM lobbied for firm producing vaccine

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OTTAWA—Not all lobbying is bad, Finance Minister Jim Flaherty said after confirming Ottawa's commitment of \$300 million for a national vaccine program to protect women and girls from cancer of the cervix.

The funding has raised eyebrows because Ken Boessenkool, a former aide to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, is a registered lobbyist on behalf of Merck Frosst Canada, which manufactures Gardasil, the only approved vaccine available for the immunization program.

Boessenkool was listed as a lobbyist on immunization policy for Merck Frosst with the federal Office of the Registrar of Lobbyists in February. But Flaherty, who originally announced the funding in the March 19 budget, said he did not discuss it with Boessenkool, who works for Hill & Knowlton.

Sheila Murphy, a Merck spokesperson, said the company hired Hill and Knowlton as part of its effort to explain the importance of the new vaccine to policymakers.

"What they do is make appointments so we can give the information to the right people," Murphy said.

The Conservatives have long criticized the influence of lobbyists and are moving to tighten up rules governing lobbying activities in Ottawa.

However, Flaherty praised those who pressed the federal government to provide money for the provinces and territories to pay for vaccinations for girls and young women against human papillomavirus (HPV), the leading cause of cervical cancer.

"Lobbying in its best sense is when people come forward to government and make clear how progress can be made, not in their own self interest but in the interest of Canadians broadly," the finance minister said during a ceremony at the Shirley E. Greenberg Women's Health Centre in Ottawa.

Flaherty said that, prior to approving the funding, he met with health professionals and representatives of the pharmaceutical industry.

Gardasil is the only approved vaccine for HPV in Canada. But finance department officials said other vaccines are expected to be available before long.

"And this initiative will make it available to Canadians broadly rather than only those who can afford it," Flaherty said as he reannounced the funding. A course of three injections of Gardasil costs about \$300.

"There was no question that this would result in saving the lives of women in Canada."

HPV is the major cause of cervical cancer, which is the second most common cancer in women aged 20 to 44, after breast cancer. Last year, new cases of cancer of the cervix totalled 1,350 and there were 390 related deaths in Canada, according to government statistics.