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Ontario

Science table member paid by teacher union for arguing against school reopenings

Potential conflict of interest: Expert

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David Fisman, a professor of epidemiology at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health PHOTO BY TWITTER /Toronto Sun

A prominent member of Ontario's science table, which advises the government on pandemic restrictions including school closures, was paid by a teachers' union for offering an argument against the government's school reopening plans at a provincial labour board hearing, the *Toronto Sun* has learned.

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David Fisman, a professor of epidemiology at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health, was retained by the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario to provide an opposing opinion on school reopenings in a document dated September 2020.



Fisman served on the science table at the same time. It's a situation that one leading expert says is a potential conflict of interest and Ontario Premier Doug Ford's office calls "deeply concerning."

"Where a person receives payment for speaking on behalf of a special interest group, it would almost certainly be appropriate to declare this as a potential conflict of interest when working in roles that are even slightly related," explained Dr. Euzebiusz Jamrozik, from the bioethics research centre at Oxford University, in an email to the *Sun*.

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“It is then partly up to the different organizations involved to decide whether there is an inappropriate degree of conflict of interest,” Jamrozik added. “Where these organizations are governmental organizations, such questions may ultimately be determined by public perceptions.”

Fisman told the *Sun* that the science table is obligated to disclose its conflicts of interest every six months.

“My ETFO work arose within that time and so did not appear on the July 17 conflict-of-interest declaration,” Fisman wrote in response to emailed questions. “I’ve recently updated my (declaration) with the science table; I understand that the new forms will be uploaded to the website shortly as part of their normal operations.”

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The epidemiologist also defended his work with the union.

“In the meantime, my ETFO work since the fall has been very much in the public domain and transparent. My work with them has also been consistent with the scientific advice I’ve had the opportunity to offer, as one of more than 20 scientists with the science table,” he said.

While Fisman did not clarify how much he was paid for the work, medical experts in Ontario told the *Sun* the typical fee for such work ranges from \$400–\$600 per hour. The document runs 29 pages.

Ford’s office released a statement saying they had not been previously told about the potential conflict.

“Our expectation is that anyone involved in providing advice to the government in this capacity would do so absent of agenda or bias, and therefore this paid relationship raises legitimate concerns,” the statement reads.

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In the document, Fisman claims the fall reopening plan “will cause illness and deaths” in the community and presents smaller class sizes as one of the key mitigation measures required. Fisman’s labour board submission does not mention potential harms to kids from keeping schools closed.

The call for smaller class sizes has been a key focus of union grievances, both during the pandemic and in the years prior to it.

There have so far been zero deaths of school-aged children caused by COVID-19 in Ontario and Dr. David Williams, the province’s chief medical officer, has said when it comes to in-classroom transmission throughout the province, there has been “hardly any at all.”

Teachers’ unions frequently cite Fisman as a leading authority on the issue. On Jan. 6, the ETFO sent a [release](#) opposing the return to in-class learning and Fisman is the only expert they quote to bolster their argument. The release does not disclose their previous relationship.

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It appears that Fisman, who is not a pediatric specialist, is the only member of the Science Table who publicly voices strong opposition to school reopening plans in the news media and online. Dr. Upton Allen, the only member of the science table who specializes in pediatric issues, is last [on record](#) back in July as being more supportive of sending kids back for in-class learning.

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The news didn't sit well with one parent activist.

“It’s inexcusable that a scientist — and a medical doctor — who is in a position to influence choices that have profound negative impacts on the well-being and mental health of children, accepted money from the ETFO to argue their agenda,” said Lia De Pauw, an organizer of Opening Schools and Daycares Safely Support Group.

“I think Dr. Fisman should be removed from the science advisory table immediately.”

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