

Boss of drug firm behind cervical cancer jabs for schoolgirls is on board of Ofsted

By Eileen Fairweather

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Paul Blackburn, a senior vice president at GlaxoSmithKline, has been appointed to the board of Ofsted

Schools Secretary Ed Balls is at the centre of a controversy over the appointment of a top executive with a drugs company to the board of education watchdog Ofsted.

Paul Blackburn, 53, is a senior vice-president at GlaxoSmithKline, which is being sued by hundreds of parents and patients who claim its drugs have caused suicide and psychosis.

His appointment came two weeks before the company won a reported £100million contract to vaccinate all schoolgirls of 12 and 13 against the sexually transmitted virus linked to cervical cancer. Family campaigners argued that the jabs would 'normalise' childhood sex.

Mr Blackburn's new role has been met with such disquiet that one childcare expert boycotted an Ofsted conference on Friday, and urged others to make a similar stand.

Announcing the appointment, Mr Balls, one of Gordon Brown's closest advisers, said Mr Blackburn had a 'passion' for helping children.

But critics fear GSK's place on the Ofsted board has given it instant moral authority and has commercially strengthened its position at a time when children are being targeted by the pharmaceutical industry.

They point to the rise in the use of prescription pills to improve behaviour and aid memory and concentration. Some have been linked to depression and violence in children.

Labour MP Graham Stringer said: 'It (GSK) is looking at new markets to create and I am disturbed that someone from Glaxo is considered appropriate for a position with Ofsted.'

Others said the appointment demonstrated an unhealthy cosy relationship between the Government and GSK, the world's second biggest pharmaceutical company, formerly known as Glaxo Wellcome.

Last year its chief executive Jean Pierre Garnier was appointed by Gordon Brown to his new Business Council, while Children's Minister Margaret Hodge made the company's chairman a member of the Higher Education Funding Council. But the latest appointment places the drugs multinational at the heart of childcare.



A girl is given the cervical cancer vaccine. GlaxoSmithKline has the £100million contract to vaccinate all schoolgirls aged 12 and 13

Labour and GSK are also linked through the cash-for-honours controversy. Although GSK stresses it does not make donations to political parties, it has invested heavily in a firm run by a man who has.

In 2004 Labour awarded a peerage to party donor Dr Paul Drayson, founder of vaccine firm PowderJect pharmaceuticals, and made him Minister for Defence Procurement. It later emerged that Glaxo Wellcome had invested £175million in PowderJect.

Mr Blackburn was one of four businessmen installed on the Ofsted board last month. 'They bring with them a breadth of private sector experience and a passion to help improve the lives of children and learners,' said Mr Balls.

As well as setting Ofsted's 'strategic priorities', the 12-strong non-executive board is required to 'safeguard and promote the rights and welfare of children'.

Mr Blackburn is financial controller at GSK. Mr Balls's department insisted he was appointed to Ofsted on merit and was not representing GSK, but questions were last night raised about his suitability. Child protection expert Liz Davies asked whether he would understand 'key childcare issues such as why new systems are failing to keep children safe from harm.'



Schools Secretary Ed Balls made the controversial decision to appoint Mr Blackburn to the board of Ofsted

As well as regulating education, Ofsted is responsible for monitoring children in care.

Outlining his reasons for pulling out of the Ofsted conference he was due to address, childcare expert Phil Frampton blamed GSK's history of testing drugs on children in care.

The New York health authority recently investigated claims that drugs were tested on 100 babies and toddlers with HIV at the city's Incarnation Children's Centre. GSK was one of the firms that supplied the drugs.

At the time it insisted that all trials followed stringent standards and complied with local laws and regulations.

But Mr Frampton – who called Mr Blackburn's appointment 'really outrageous' – said: 'Drug trials using children in care are a modern form of child slavery, only more insidious.'

'Do we want the modern Bodysnatchers at the heart of the care system using their position on Ofsted as a cover for their global exploitation of children in care?'

In 2000 Glaxo Wellcome was accused of extraordinary 'obfuscation' by Ireland's senate after a commission unsuccessfully sought files concerning vaccine trials it conducted in the Sixties and Seventies on children in care homes. At the time the firm said: 'Glaxo Wellcome regrets any distress that may have been caused to individuals involved in these trials.'

Last night GSK rejected criticism of Mr Blackburn's appointment and described Mr Frampton's comments as 'without foundation'. It added: 'GSK acts properly and responsibly in the conduct of all its clinical trials, including those related to children.'

GSK faces class actions in Britain and the US by hundreds of families whose children allegedly became suicidal, psychotic or addicted after taking its anti-depressant Seroxat. The company was accused of concealing its adverse effects on children for more than a decade.

Legal action in the US recently forced GSK to publish studies showing that children on Seroxat are twice as likely to have suicidal thoughts as those on a dummy pill. Although GSK says: 'Seroxat has never been approved by EU or US regulators as a medicine for those under 18,' many doctors legally give it to children in a practice known as 'off label' prescribing.

Schools and the state childcare boom present a lucrative market for drugs including those to treat obesity, unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

GSK markets an anti-ADHD drug in the United States – amphetamine Dexedrine – and may yet try to market it or a similar drug in Britain.


It recommends Dexedrine for ‘stabilising’ patients from three years to 16 who exhibit ‘distractibility, short attention span and hyperactivity’. Critics say this could describe any normal toddler or hormonal teen, and drugs should be a last resort.

Since 2006, the US Food and Drug Administration has made ADHD drugs manufacturers provide warnings of potentially fatal reactions in those with weak hearts, and the risk of ‘psychotic or manic symptoms, for example hallucinations, delusional thinking, or mania in children and adolescents without a prior history’.

The FDA has linked ADHD drugs to 25 deaths in the US, and they are allegedly linked to the deaths of seven in Britain.

Ofsted said in a statement: ‘The Ofsted Board determines the strategic direction for Ofsted and ensures that its functions are performed efficiently and effectively, but has no operational responsibilities.

‘Paul Blackburn was selected to become a non-executive member of the Ofsted Board for his financial expertise and experience. He is appointed as an individual and does not represent GlaxoSmithKline.’


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