

## Curbing corruption in medicine

*Roman Bystrianyk, "Curbing corruption in medicine", Health Sentinel, April 4, 2006,*

Pharmaceutical companies spend between \$12 and \$18 billion every year marketing to physicians and residents. This amount of money includes approximately 60 million annual visits by pharmaceutical representatives as well as most of the \$1.5 billion spent annually on continuing medical education.

In the January 25th issue of Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), 11 authors of a paper call for a reexamination of health industry practices that create conflicts of interest throughout the medical field. Financial conflicts of interest occur when doctors deviate from their professional obligations for economic or other personal gain.

"Approximately 90% of 21 billion marketing budget of the pharmaceutical industry continues to be directed at physicians, despite a dramatic increase in direct-to consumer advertising." In 2000, the pharmaceutical and medical device industry sponsored over 300,000 events specifically for physicians. Industry also contracts with many doctors to serve on advisory boards. The obvious purpose of all these actions is clearly for drug companies to promote the use of their products.

It's long been assumed by many that doctors can remain objective if the cost of the gifts is small. However, social science research shows that the desire to reciprocate for even low cost gifts is a powerful force on behavior. "Individuals receiving gifts are often unable to remain objective; they reweigh information and choices in light of the gift. The rate of drug prescriptions by physicians increases substantially after they see sales representatives, attend company-supported symposia, or accept samples." Unfortunately, studies show that the overwhelming majority of these influences "had negative results on clinical care."

The authors call for a major reform in the way business and medicine is conducted.

1. A complete ban on all gifts of any value, free meals, payment for traveling to and time spent at meetings, and in addition to payment for participation for CME [Continuing Medical Education] from drug and medical device companies.
2. Providing drug samples directly to doctors needs to be prohibited. This should be replaced with a system that distances the company and its products from doctors.
3. Groups overseeing the purchase of drugs and medical devices should exclude all doctors with any financial relationships with companies.
4. More stringent regulation on companies that provide continuing medical education.
5. Faculty at academic medical centers should not be members of speaker bureaus for medical device or drug companies. "Speaker bureaus are an extension of manufacturers' marketing apparatus."

The authors conclude that if these measures are put into place that, "decisions by physicians on which prescriptions to write and which device to use might become more evidence-based; medical societies' practice guidelines might become less subject to bias. A greater reliance on objective sources for accurate up-to-date information would also promote better patient outcomes and total expenditures on prescription drugs might decline."

"Ultimately, the implementation of these proposals will substantially reduce the need for external regulation to safeguard against market-driven conflicts of interest, and the medical profession will reaffirm very publicly its commitment to put the interests of patients first."

SOURCE: JAMA, January 25, 2006

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