

The Pharmaceutical Industry and Medical Education

A recent commentary in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*¹ on the perils of industry involvement in medical education caught my attention. The authors made sweeping proposals on the role of the pharmaceutical industry in medicine on many fronts and suggested that the two should be as separate as possible. Among many proposals to distance medicine from industry was the rather offhand suggestion that industry should be essentially banned from financially supporting continuing medical education (CME). This made me wonder which is worse: the supposedly “tainted by industry” CME or no CME at all?

CME in dermatology is heavily funded by the pharmaceutical industry. Some examples are obvious, such as a dinner speaker funded by a drug company. Some CME events are less obvious; grand rounds at the local university’s department of dermatology often feature an industry-sponsored speaker, a relationship medical students may not appreciate. Even the largest society meetings are paid for by drug companies who purchase exhibition booths and make “unrestricted educational grants.” Tuition and dues paid by attendees do not come close to covering the costs of the meeting.

The commentary in *JAMA* states “manufacturers should not be permitted to provide support directly or indirectly through a subsidiary agency to any ACCME-accredited program.” The article goes on to say, “this policy would likely reduce the contributions made by drug and device companies to CME programs” and “other ways of funding CME programs will have to be identified.”¹ This last sentence is worthy of closer consideration. However, it is not clear what alternative funding mechanisms would be available.

If drug company support is not available for CME, then how would it be funded? Would the government be willing to provide more financial support for medical education? I doubt it, as they would like to cut back on healthcare spending overall. Would medical schools fund dermatology CME meetings? Many medical schools are

already experiencing financial difficulty, and dermatology is not typically at the top of the funding list. Would practicing physicians be willing to pay higher dues and tuition for societies and meetings? Even greatly increased dues and tuition would not come close to covering the actual cost of CME as it currently exists. The amount practitioners would have to pay would be truly impressive. Of course, medical students and residents have no way to pay these high fees. In sum, if industry support is banned, the amount and perhaps the quality of CME would precipitously decline. The remaining CME programs would be free of any conflict of interest, but I am afraid that they would not be readily available.

The pharmaceutical industry’s goal in funding CME is to sell products. Presumably, it is an effective tactic or they would not use it. In my opinion, the problem seems to be that if we protect ourselves from their sales pitch by banning industry participation, we may lose the majority of our CME programs. Is the pharmaceutical industry really so terrible that we should cancel most CME programs to escape its influence? Implicit in the *JAMA* commentary is that all actions of industry are tainted and antithetical to good medicine. It does not seem impossible to imagine that there are times when industry and medicine could share a common goal. More important, I do not accept the argument that doctors are so easily manipulated that disclosure of actual and potential conflicts of interest by speakers is doomed to failure. Honest and full disclosure of any industry relationship by the speakers and coordinators of the CME event affords physicians some measure of skepticism and thus the ability to make their own informed decisions.

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Reference

1. Brennan TA, Rothman DJ, Blank L, et al. Health industry practices that create conflicts of interest. *JAMA*. 2006;295:429-433. ■