

INVOLVEMENT OF COMMERCIAL INTERESTS IN MEDICAL STUDENT TEACHING

“If you’ll just look in your product bags you’ll see”

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Preamble

- Medical students are exposed to marketing approaches from a range of healthcare industries from their first clinical experiences. While some Clinical Schools have a clear policy on the involvement of commercial interests, there is a need for a uniform approach across all Schools.
- Commercial organisations, such as pharmaceutical industry, manufacturers of medical equipment and indemnity insurance companies often initiate, promote and develop their relationships with the medical profession during medical school.
- These relationships may take various forms, including:
 - sponsorship of educational events, either specifically for students, or at postgraduate training events that students also attend
 - sponsorship of student social and extramural events
 - sponsorship of research events and conferences, either specifically for students, or at postgraduate training events that students also attend
- Educational involvement may be expressed by:
 - provision of equipment and goods used for teaching, particularly in procedural and clinical skills
 - provision of food and meals at educational events
 - provision of gifts such as lanyards, pens, notepads and other more substantial items advertising their company
 - actual delivery or sponsorship of educational presentations, often with reference to products manufactured by that company
 - advertisements, including banners, posters, display tables, logos on presentation slides and gifts at events

Effects on medical students

- While harm from such relationships with medical students is difficult to measure, it is widely accepted that sponsorship and gift-giving from pharmaceutical industry to medical practitioners has influential effects on prescribing patterns and research conduct. [1] It is not uncommon to see ‘gift bags’ tailored for medical students and it follows that commercial companies must see a commercial benefit from such gifts and sponsorship.
- Other potential effects on medical students include:
 - Suboptimal learning that may result from the quality of teaching that is delivered or influenced by commercial sponsorship
 - Promotion of relationships between commercial interests and medical students as being a “normal” part of training and professional life

- The development of a sense of entitlement concerning gifts and services provided by commercial interests.

Guidelines and responses

- Professional bodies such as the AMA have developed position statements where the guiding principle is that the educational needs of students and postgraduates, and indirectly, patient care, must come before any commercial interest. [2] The American Medical Student Association has taken a step further with the PharmFree campaign where students pledge not to accept any gifts or drug information from pharmaceutical companies. [3] MedSoc does not accept sponsorship by pharmaceutical companies as a matter of principle.
- Rogers et al [1] et al have argued that medical educators have a duty to protect students from such influences, and indirectly, patients from the harm of inappropriate prescribing and medical interventions. There are a range of possible responses; the “purist” approach of banning involvement may be difficult to sustain given the well established practice of commercial contributions to hospital events in which students and their teachers participate. Being situated in this environment, it may then be “natural” for Clinical Schools to follow suit when organising their own events. However, Clinical Schools are also official bodies of the University, an institution of higher learning. Faculty endorsed guidelines may thus assist Schools to moderate the effects of commercial interests on student education.

Recommendations

The Faculty of Medicine permits commercial sponsorship of educational events under the following conditions:

- Ensuring that teaching is of the highest quality should be the guiding principle. This includes providing information that is evidence based, unbiased and which considers alternative perspectives.
- Involvement by commercial interests should be limited to the provision of equipment and educational grants free of any conditions on the use of these resources. Equipment should not advertise its source and the funding source should not have any input on the content of the educational activity or choice of speakers. The provision of resources should be regularly audited and open to public scrutiny. Direct presentations from representatives or sponsored speakers should not play any part in student teaching.
- Commercial displays and promotional products should be located outside teaching venues and placed so as to allow commercial free areas for collegial exchange, particularly near venue entrance and exits.
- Currently PPD teaching in Conflict of Interest is in Stage III. This should be introduced in Stage I and incorporated into clinical ethics teaching throughout the course.

References

1. Rogers, W.A., et al., *The ethics of pharmaceutical industry relationships with medical students*. Med J Aust, 2004. **180**(8): p. 411-4.
2. Australian Medical Association, *Position Statement: Doctors' Relationships with the Pharmaceutical Industry - 1994. Revised 2002*. <http://www.ama.com.au/web.nsf/doc/WEEN-5GJ7MH>, 2002. **Accessed 24/02/08**.
3. American Medical Student Association, *National PharmFree Campaign*. <http://www.amsa.org/prof/pharmfree.cfm>, 2008. **Accessed 24/02/08**.