



Special Article

Ethical Concerns of Congresses and Joint Winter Meetings of the Spanish Society of Pneumology and Thoracic Surgery[☆]Eusebi Chiner,^{a,*} Estrella Fernández-Fabrellas,^b Pilar de Lucas^c^a *Secretario General de la Sociedad Española de Neumología y Cirugía Torácica (SEPAR), Spain*^b *Directora del Comité de Congresos de la Sociedad Española de Neumología y Cirugía Torácica (SEPAR), Spain*^c *Presidenta de la Sociedad Española de Neumología y Cirugía Torácica (SEPAR), Spain*

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ABSTRACT

The pharmaceutical industry contributes to the development of new drugs, provides funding for research and collaborates in continuing medical education. Although this relationship with medical practice is beneficial and desirable, commercial interests could potentially eclipse patient benefits and compromise professional integrity. Congresses and meetings of the Spanish Society of Pneumology and Thoracic Surgery (SEPAR) agglutinate different spheres of knowledge, including aspects such as bioethics, management and communication, always centered on patient and their well-being. SEPAR congresses and meetings should provide sufficient economic benefits to be reinvested in research and other purposes which are reflected in SEPAR statutes in order to ensure the solvency, sustainability and economic independence of the Society. SEPAR has developed strict regulations governing the sponsorship and accreditation of training activities while striving for a balance between the interests of the industry and its own necessary independence, which results from the constant concern for maintaining good medical practice and complying with ethical aspects. This regulation is useful from an organizational and logistical standpoint, and it is necessary to prevent or resolve any possible conflicts of interest. Scientific societies should regulate common practices that could potentially result in conflicts of interest.

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Aspectos éticos de los congresos y reuniones de invierno conjuntas de las áreas de la Sociedad Española de Neumología y Cirugía Torácica

RESUMEN

La industria farmacéutica contribuye al desarrollo de nuevos medicamentos, promueve ayudas a la investigación y colabora en la formación médica continuada. Aunque esta relación con la práctica médica es beneficiosa y deseable, podrían anteponerse así intereses comerciales al beneficio de los pacientes y comprometer la integridad profesional. Los congresos y reuniones de la Sociedad Española de Neumología y Cirugía Torácica (SEPAR) aglutinan distintas parcelas del conocimiento, incluyendo aspectos como la bioética, la gestión y la comunicación, centrados en el paciente. Los congresos y reuniones de la SEPAR deben proporcionar beneficios económicos suficientes para reinvertirlos en investigación y demás fines que quedan reflejados en los Estatutos de la SEPAR, para garantizar la solvencia, la sostenibilidad y la independencia económica de la Sociedad. La SEPAR ha desarrollado un estricto reglamento que regula el patrocinio y la acreditación de las actividades formativas, buscando armonizar los intereses de la industria con la necesaria independencia, en línea con la preocupación constante por mantener la buena práctica médica y cumplir todos los aspectos éticos. Este reglamento es útil desde el punto de vista organizativo y logístico, y necesario para prevenir o resolver eventuales conflictos de intereses. Las sociedades científicas deberían regular algunas prácticas comunes que puedan originarlos.

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Introduction

The influence of the pharmaceutical industry on medical practices is an undeniable reality. This relationship embraces desirable beneficial aspects, such as the industry's contribution to the development of new drugs, research grants and collaboration in continuing medical training, as well as other less desirable aspects, such as the possibility of putting commercial interests before the benefit of the patients.¹

In addition to contributing a high percentage of the financial support for medical research, in Spain the funding of continuing medical training also falls largely on the pharmaceutical industry. This is due, among other factors, to the scant resources from the healthcare administration for training their professionals and the lower salaries of healthcare professionals, compared to other countries in the European Union. This situation makes continuing medical training practically impossible without the help of the industry. However, it is exactly this type of support that is considered undesirable by some academic sectors, since, it is argued, the investment in research by the industry and its influence on publications could lead to a distortion of the scientific evidence and hinder the objective evaluation of data.^{2,3}

The involvement of the pharmaceutical industry in medical education is precisely one of the areas in which conflicts of interest may be generated, so a strict separation is required to achieve critical, unbiased training, based exclusively on scientific evidence. This objectivity is even more important when clinical practice guidelines or consensus documents which directly influence patient care are being drawn up. A recent survey showed that relationships between the executive staff of scientific societies and the industry were common, and that members had participated in decisions about protocols sponsored by companies with which they had a financial relationship. The conclusion was that the guidelines for the appropriate handling of conflicts of interest needed revision.⁴

In recent years, various prestigious publications have made a critical examination of these issues,^{5–11} and the debate on the strictness of the ethical guidelines established for relations between healthcare professionals and the industry remains open and is constantly evolving.^{12–14}

In 2006 and 2009, the *American Board of Internal Medicine Foundation* (ABIM) and the *Institute on Medicine as a Profession* (IMAP) published joint recommendations on conflicts of interest.^{15,16} The *American Medical Association* (AMA) also has a committee specifically dedicated to issues concerning medical ethics, bioethics and legal and professional matters.¹⁷ It basically addresses all issues concerning the current influence of market incentives which could challenge the first principle of the medical profession, i.e., the commitment to place the interests of the patient first, with no interference in decision making.

The AMA defines conflict of interest in the relationship between the physician and the industry as the situation “when the financial interest of a physician enters into or threatens to enter into conflict with the best interests of his/her patient”.¹⁸ Other definitions proposed include “a set of conditions in which a judgment or action which should be determined by a primary value, defined by professional or ethical reasons, may be or appear to be influenced by a second interest”.⁷

To remedy the current situation and to prevent professional integrity being compromised in the future, academic institutions and scientific societies must regulate or take a position regarding some common practices which constitute conflicts of interests with pharmaceutical or electro-medical device companies and service suppliers. Although some international societies have produced guidelines in this respect,^{15,16,19} very few Spanish scientific societies have addressed these general issues, and much less in a detailed manner.^{20–23}

In accordance with the above-mentioned premises, the aim of this paper was to analyze and publish how the Spanish Society for Pneumology and Thoracic Surgery (SEPAR) has addressed possible conflicts of interests and the ethical aspects of SEPAR congresses and scientific meetings, to determine a middle ground between the need for educational activities and updating medical knowledge and the interests of the pharmaceutical industry, within the context of the current situation.

Regulatory Framework of the Spanish Society of Pneumology and Thoracic Surgery

The SEPAR Statutes, in Article 4, specify that the activities of the Society will be to promote research in the areas of respiratory and thoracic medicine and health; to organize an annual National Congress, with the aim, among others, of presenting and discussing medical and surgical issues related with respiratory and thoracic medicine and health, scientific debate on findings, results and data in these areas; to pursue agreements and consensus positions of interest for the scientific community related with respiratory and thoracic physiology, epidemiology and pathology; to exchange opinions on scientific and professional matters regarding respiratory and thoracic medicine and health; to develop educational and continuing training activities; and to discuss and analyze any professional, educational, patient care, training or research matters that may be of interest to the Society.²⁴

These statutes also state that, to achieve these objectives, the Society will be responsible for ensuring, by any means it considers appropriate, that the scientific level of this Congress is sufficiently high and that its structure and organization are optimal.²⁴

In accordance with these statutes, in addition to the annual Congress, SEPAR will be responsible for organizing courses, meetings, conferences, symposia, short courses, workshops, seminars or any other scientific or professional event on matters relating to respiratory and thoracic medicine and health, as determined by the governing body of the Society or, by delegation, its organizational or management structures. SEPAR works with members of the Society who may require collaboration in the organization, management, sponsoring or supervision of courses, seminars, meetings or any type of scientific or professional event which is sponsored by those members, if help is requested. This will be provided that it is in accordance with the established regulations and the dissemination of the activities organized by the Society, as well as how much scientific and professional information is considered necessary, both for the scientific community and the healthcare administration, and for the patients and general population, in relation with the above-mentioned aims and objectives.

In 2008, the Regulations for SEPAR Congresses and Joint Winter Meetings were drawn up and updated in 2011 and 2012.²⁵ The scope of these regulations is wide and the approach is detailed. Most of the issues are covered, including organizational aspects, such as the composition and functions of the Congress Committee (CCO), the functions of the Chairman of the Local Organizing Committee, the CCO's relationship with the Board of Directors, and with the various Advisory Committees, as well as matters relating to the payment of speakers, relations with the industry, the media, publicizing the Congress and relations with service providers. These regulations address certain ethical aspects, so a large amount of the material discussed here has been reworked from this document, in addition to our consultation of specific bibliographical sources.

Ethical Aspects of the National Congress of the Spanish Society of Pneumology and Thoracic Surgery

The National Congress, together with the Joint Winter Meeting of the various areas, is SEPAR's most important scientific event.

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