

Should dermatology residents accept educational support sponsored or funded by pharmaceutical companies?

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CASE SCENARIO

As a first-year dermatology resident, Dr Jones is both impressed and intimidated by the fund of knowledge of his senior residents. They tell him that the best studying resource is a free review guide with an accompanying Web site and board and in-training examination practice questions, and they offer him a copy. The residents refer to this review book by the name of the pharmaceutical company that has sponsored its production and distribution. Although the company was not directly involved in writing the review, the review can only be obtained with the company's sponsorship because it is not commercially available for sale. Even though the residency program's hospital has set strict rules about physician-industry relationships and explicitly bans any gifts (including educational guides or textbooks) from industry, the residents have no trouble obtaining free copies. The company is happy to provide these copies, and the residency program director makes no effort to object.

Dr Jones should:

- A. Accept the review guide, as all the other residents in the program have been using it, without any consequence, and it is important to be competitive with other residency programs throughout the country that allow such gifts.
- B. Accept the review guide, because, whereas the pharmaceutical company sponsored its distribution, it had no role in writing it, so there is no reason to be concerned about bias or misinformation. Besides, he does not even know which medications the company makes and thus cannot be influenced.
- C. Accept the review guide, because, even though the review guide is a gift, it has educational value and thus should be an exception to the hospital's rules against gifts from industry.
- D. Thank the senior residents, but decline to use the study guide. There are other resources available for board and in-training examination preparation, including textbooks and study books for purchase, which can be used without any possible conflict of interest or inappropriate influence.

DISCUSSION

This scenario presents an ethical dilemma for the dermatology resident. The resident is trying to further his education by looking for the best available study materials, and he is offered a free resource that his colleagues have all used to enhance their

knowledge, despite hospital rules that specifically ban such gifts from the pharmaceutical industry to physicians at his hospital.

Is it permissible and ethical to break hospital rules that appear both unenforceable and at odds with residents' educational goals? There is no

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disputing that to accept a gift from a drug company against explicit hospital rules that ban such practices is a violation, despite the ease in which this has been done in the past within this residency. The rules of the hospital are clear, and breaking them permits the hospital to impose whatever penalties it sees fit.

In the last 10 years, the dilemma presented in this scenario has inspired many academic institutions to adopt strict rules limiting interactions of employees including residents with industry representatives. For instance, the policies of Yale School of Medicine (New Haven, CT) and Stanford School of Medicine (Palo Alto, CA) ban all gifts without exception, including textbooks and educational materials. Even if the gift would simply defray the costs of attending a continuing medical education activity, these institutions ban this behavior. Institutions such as the University of Michigan Health System (Ann Arbor, MI) and Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center (New York, NY) have gone even further, ending all industry-supported continuing medical education.

In the hospital setting, a conflict of interest can arise when a doctor's self-interest and professional duty are at odds. Strict policies banning gifts from industry at academic institutions were instituted in the past several years to protect doctors against such potential conflicts of interest. Although traditionally a distinction has often been made between gifts of educational value (eg, books) and gifts of purely recreational value (eg, tote bags), this distinction is rarely made any longer. In fact, the Pharmaceutical Researchers and Manufacturers of America's own marketing code prohibits *all* gifts valued over \$100 regardless of educational value.¹ This is because, no matter the nature of the gift, its purpose is to influence behavior.

Putting aside any hospital rules, is it *ethical* to accept a gift from industry? What if the gift furthers the education of its recipient? The American Medical Association guidelines continue to permit gifts that benefit patients and are not of substantial monetary value. But is it to the patient's benefit for a resident to accept a textbook or educational review? Of course, the better the doctors' education, the better the patients' care. If pharmaceutical-sponsored educational gifts can better educate doctors, then it seems logical that accepting the gifts should be ethical. On the other hand, it is always true that this same information compiled in the review books can be gleaned from other sources devoid of industry influence. Thus, from an ethical standpoint, it is not necessarily in the patient's best interest for a physician to accept an educational gift. One fact appears

to be irrefutable: even if one were to assume that no bias occurred via gifts (despite evidence to the contrary²⁻⁴), by eliminating all gifts, the most restrictive hospital policies have eliminated even the misperception that influence has occurred.

The dermatologist's relationship with patients (like any physician's) is one of trust and confidence. Patients trust dermatologists to always prescribe medications that are in their best interest. This is in contrast to a salesperson-customer relationship where the customer would be foolish to expect that the salesperson always offers advice without any personal interest. The doctor-patient relationship is thus unique, and we need to be sure while we practice that our behavior is not impacted by conflicts of interest in choosing one therapy versus another. We also need to go so far as to avoid the *perception* by our patients that we might be under the influence of a potential conflict of interest. If a patient knew that a physician had accepted a gift from a company that made one of the possible treatment options for the patient's condition, would the patient be confident that this gift did not influence the choice of therapy? Possibly not. So, even if there truly were no influence or bias caused by such a gift, it seems most prudent to avoid any impression of a conflict by not accepting any gifts.

Unlike their more established attending counterparts, residents often are cash-strapped. Because they believe they cannot afford adequate study materials on their own, many residents are compelled to take these gifts without any thought as to how it may shape or influence their development as physicians. It is important for residency programs to address this issue so that their residents are not put in the position of having to make ethically questionable choices driven by financial circumstance and peer pressure.

Aside from gift-giving, physician-industry interaction is not only acceptable in many cases, but it is also a productive partnership as we collaborate in the development of new therapies and technologies. So, we do not mean to suggest that policies restricting gifts from companies to physicians should impede the development of relationships with industry. These relationships need not have conflicts if certain protections are put in place. However, in practice, when hospitals implement rules to ensure that no conflicts are allowed, industry can on occasion show less interest in building such relationships with those organizations. Industry's goal is to make money and each company is ultimately responsible to its shareholders. By contrast, physicians, including dermatologists, may have the reasonable goal of making

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