

Editorial

The Ethics of Pharmaceutical Industry Support

With shrinking allocations to medical institutions and increasing competition for budgetary allocations amongst medical institutions all over the world, medical professionals are looking more and more towards the pharmaceutical and other medical related industries for help in conducting research and organizing scientific conferences. While the increasing involvement of pharmaceutical and medical companies in such ventures has been more and more accepted and becoming acceptable, it is not without many apparent and hidden problems.

The industry involved in medical related products is based on the same commercial principles as any other industry and is naturally motivated by concern for profits superseding all other concerns in the final analysis. And therein lies both the strength and the potential weakness of any arrangement this industry may make with medical institutions and medical professionals whose ultimate motivation must be solution of medical problems and cure of diseases, irrespective of any financial implications. While both the industry and the medical professional share the common objective of curing the sick, the final motivations are different. It is not difficult to see then how each may be trying to take the better of the other even though trying to achieve the same goal. In the course of this process, there has developed an increasingly complex relationship between the industry and the professional.

While medical institutions are in a much stronger position to work out the nature of the industry-professional relationship and evolve certain ethics of their own, the individual physician is much more vulnerable to fall prey to an unhealthy turn of such relationship. This is especially true because of the inequality involved, i.e., a single person versus a large industrial corporation. A physician who is not on guard may then be amenable to exploitation which may not be possible in an institutional group setting. While these dangers lurk, the realization continues that in the tight financial atmosphere of today no significant research or scientific exchange of medical knowledge on a large scale is possible without help from the industry.

What is the answer to this dilemma? I think the common interest of service to the sick if kept uppermost in such relationship should rid us of much of the problems, i.e., to provide best possible care and treatment at lowest possible cost to the patient.

If costs are to be cut, all fringe benefits to all concerned are to be kept trimmed to the minimum. This itself will guide all concerned as to appropriateness of the support being sought from or given by the industry. More importantly, all grants, scholarships, financial or other support given by the industry to institutions or professionals must be open and available for scrutiny by any concerned professional body or agency. This in itself will ensure no unholy collusion between any unscrupulous elements that may exist in the industry or among the professionals. Also, professional bodies must lay down some guidelines for obtaining support from the industry.

Editor.