

Group Urges Ban on Medical Giveaways

By GARDINER HARRIS *The New York Times* April 28, 2008

Drug and medical device companies should be banned from offering free food, gifts, travel and ghost-writing services to doctors, staff members and students in all 129 of the nation's medical colleges, an influential college association has concluded.

The proposed ban is the result of a two-year effort by the group, the Association of American Medical Colleges, to create a model policy governing interactions between the schools and industry. While schools can ignore the association's advice, most follow its recommendations.

Rob Restuccia, executive director of the Prescription Project, a nonprofit group dedicated to eliminating conflicts of interest in medicine, said the report would transform medical education.

"Most medical schools do not have strong conflict-of-interest policies, and this report will change that," Mr. Restuccia said.

The rules would apply only to medical schools, but they could have enormous influence across medicine, said Dr. David Rothman, president of the Institute on Medicine as a Profession at Columbia University.

"We're hoping the example set by academic medical colleges will be contagious," Dr. Rothman said.

Drug companies spend billions wooing doctors – more than they spend on research or consumer advertising. Medical schools, packed with prominent professors and impressionable trainees, are particularly attractive marketing targets.

So companies have for decades provided faculty and students free food and gifts, offered lucrative consulting arrangements to top-notch teachers and even ghost-wrote research papers for busy professors.

"Such forms of industry involvement tend to establish reciprocal relationships that can inject bias, distort decision-making and create the perception among colleagues,

students, trainees and the public that practitioners are being ‘bought’ or ‘bribed’ by industry,” the report said.

A group of influential doctors decried these practices in a 2006 article in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, and said that medical schools should ban them. In the article’s wake, the medical college association created a task force.

With Dr. Roy Vagelos, a former Merck chief executive, serving as the task force’s chairman and the chief executives of Pfizer, Eli Lilly, Amgen and Medtronic on the roster, some who advocate for greater restrictions on industry influence in medicine predicted that the report would be weak.

They were wrong.

In addition to the gift, food and travel bans, the report recommended that medical schools should “strongly discourage participation by their faculty in industry-sponsored speakers’ bureaus,” in which doctors are paid to promote drug and device benefits.

It recommended that schools set up centralized systems for accepting free drug samples or “alternative ways to manage pharmaceutical sample distribution that do not carry the risks to professionalism with which current practices are associated.” It suggested that schools audit independently accredited medical education seminars given by faculty “for the presence of inappropriate influence.” And it said the rules should apply to faculty even when off-duty or away from school.

Speakers’ bureaus and drug samples are pillars of the industry’s marketing operations, and many medical school professors have resisted efforts to restrict them. Only a handful of medical schools presently bar faculty members from serving on speakers’ bureaus, so if this recommendation is widely adopted, it could transform the relationship between medical school faculty and industry, and it could change substantially the way medical education is routinely delivered.

Indeed, the chief executives of Pfizer and Eli Lilly dissented from the report’s recommendation regarding speakers’ bureaus.

“We continue to believe that these types of programs, which are subject to clear regulations regarding their content, can be worthwhile educational activities,” wrote Jeffrey B. Kindler of Pfizer and Sidney Taurel of Lilly.

David Beier, an Amgen senior vice president, wrote a letter that endorsed the report’s recommendations but disagreed with some of its text “because we have a different view about the accuracy concerning representations about the motives of the participants in industry-academic interactions.”

Ken Johnson of the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, said his group would review the report.

“Providing physicians – and medical students – with timely, accurate information about the medicines they prescribe clearly benefits patients and advances healthcare throughout the United States,” Mr. Johnson said.

Dr. Robert J. Alpern, dean of the Yale School of Medicine, said that the university presently had no limits on participation in company speakers’ bureaus, but that because of the medical college association’s report he was thinking of taking them on.

“I don’t have a problem with doctors making \$3,000 or \$5,000 a year on the side,” he said, “but it’s a totally different thing when it’s \$80,000.” Even more distasteful, Dr. Alpern said, is that the slides used in many of these presentations are created by drug makers, not the speakers.

“That’s like ghost-talking,” Dr. Alpern said.

Dr. Arthur S. Levine, dean of the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, said that when he graduated from medical school in 1964, Eli Lilly gave him his first doctor’s bag, and Roche gave him an Omega watch for being valedictorian. He still has the watch.

But this year’s graduating class of doctors at Pittsburgh will not be allowed to accept any of these gifts, and the daily pizza lunches brought by drug companies are gone, he said.

Julie Gottlieb, assistant dean of policy coordination for Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, said Hopkins had adopted some of the association’s recommendations and was considering others.

“This report is bound to influence our deliberations,” she said.

Dr. Vagelos, formerly of Merck, said that the report’s recommendations were certain to face resistance among faculty who liked the present system.

“The outcome of this for the industry is that those companies that are strong in science will always be welcome at medical colleges and others won’t,” Dr. Vagelos said.