

Christian Medical and Dental Fellowship of Australia (CMDFA) – Guidance Note

Doctor/Dentist & Pharmaceutical/Medical Device Industry Relationships

Introduction

Doctors and dentists appreciate the contribution that the pharmaceutical and medical device industries make to the practice of medicine/dentistry. Without the discoveries made by industry, many of the medical advances and products of recent decades would never have been possible. However, there must be appropriate boundaries between practicing doctors/dentists and industry. Industry viability understandably requires fiscal integrity and a margin of profit. Doctors and dentists' primary motive should be to promote the welfare of their patients. The resultant conflict of interest requires that a doctor/dentist deliberately evaluates the ethics of receiving gifts from industry. There are many published standards for appropriate relationships between industry and doctors. In an effort to give guidance to its members, CMDFA addresses the question, "What is the appropriate responsibility of a Christian doctor/dentist when offered incentives from industry?"

The Current Situation

A conflict of interest occurs where a person's professional judgement about a primary interest is unduly influenced by a secondary interest. Secondary interests of financial gain or prestige, whilst not illegitimate in themselves, have been demonstrated to be a source of conflict that can taint the integrity of the medical and dental professions and the research process. Managing conflict of interest in medicine is about maintaining the integrity of professional judgement and maintaining confidence in the profession. Once a conflict of interest has been identified by the doctor/dentist, they must decide how to manage it. This may involve disclosing the potential conflict to their patients.

The choice of what pharmaceutical or medical device to use is largely made by the doctor/dentist though this choice is often influenced by institutional or insurance company constraints and incentives. Therapeutic choices must be individualized with due consideration of the best scientific evidence available and costs involved. Industries seek to promote the use of their product to the doctor by providing, among other things, free educational opportunities, gifts, and services. Studies demonstrate that incentives from industry influence recipients more than doctors/dentists realise.

Biblical Foundation

A Christian response must consider several Biblical principles:

1. The two great commandments are to love God and neighbour.
 - Jesus warns of the danger of being motivated by a love of money or other things of this world.
 - Jesus directs that our motives be pure and undivided.
 - Christians must “guard their hearts” against undue influence.
2. The behaviour of a Christian must be “above reproach.”
 - Christians should avoid any form of inappropriate behaviour.
 - Receiving incentives could place people under the influence of others. Even with the best intentions, we may be inappropriately biased.

Ethical Principle

Doctors/dentists should consider carefully the basis of their therapeutic decisions to assure that they are made in accordance with best possible evidence applied to the welfare of the patient. Personal gain must never be the compelling reason for our decisions. Incentives from industry, intended to influence therapeutic choices, can compromise doctor integrity and behaviour.

Recommendations:

Categories of receiving gifts from industry:

1. Unethical practices:
 - Contracts that obligate the doctor/dentist to prescribe a particular pharmaceutical for reasons of personal gain.
 - Failure to disclose the degree to which the industry or institution controls the content of presentations, recommendations, or product placements.
 - Failure to disclose to the patient any financial relationships with the industry or institution.
 - Selling materials that were gifts, including samples.
 - Receiving greater compensation from a company than would be fair and reasonable for services rendered.
2. Practices requiring extreme caution:

- Receiving incentives from industry or institutions to build rapport or promote exposure to their products, e.g., free meals, entertainment, etc.
- Personal use of product samples.

3. Practices requiring caution:

- Accepting product samples: Product samples are distributed to doctors/dentists as a large part of the industry's advertising budget. These are intended to bring attention to the products and allow the doctor/dentist some experience in using them. They should be received by the doctor/dentist with "no strings attached."
 - i. Appropriate uses include distribution to indigent patients and as a means to introduce a patient to a new product to assess efficacy and side effects before requiring their purchase. Product samples may also be used for dose titration.
 - ii. Inappropriate uses: Product samples must never be given in a way that doctors/dentists promote themselves as benefactors.
- Accepting information from Industry. A discerning doctor/dentist is wise to look for independent sources of information. One must exercise caution in allowing the following sources to become the basis for therapeutic decisions:
 - i. Sales promotional literature. This material is biased to promote the product. In the United States these materials are regulated by the FDA but are not always in compliance.
 - ii. Industry sponsored studies. When using studies that are financed and published by the manufacturer, the doctor/dentist must keep in mind that though the work may be done with integrity, the conclusions may be subject to bias. Negative studies may not be readily available and only favourable outcomes emphasized.
 - iii. Industry sponsored conferences and meetings where the sponsored products are promoted.

4. Generally ethical practices:

- Attending or sponsoring educational activities that have received support from industry where it is clearly stated that industry has no control over the content and any conflict of interest on the part of the faculty is clearly revealed.
- Receiving reprints from peer reviewed journals.

- Requesting industry contribution to charitable efforts.

5. Situations in which it is difficult to refuse gifts from industry.

- Training on certain medical/dental devices provided only by the manufacturer. This is often provided in a setting that involves travel, lodging, meals, etc. as a part of the educational experience. In this context, there may be limited options and the recipient must discern the appropriate response.
- Industry employees may leave incentives for a doctor/dentist without giving an opportunity to decline. In this situation, it is imperative that the doctor/dentist not allow these incentives to affect their practice.

Conclusion

Christian doctors/dentists must be wary of any inappropriate influence industry has over their prescribing behaviours and assure that their practices are guided by what is best for their patients and in accord with biblical principles.

As a special profession concerned with the wellbeing of people, members must have integrity in the way that they conduct themselves when they perceive there is a conflict of interest and that the way they handle it inspires the confidence and trust of the community. Given the frailty of human nature and the historical examples of conflicts of interest in medicine/dentistry, it is hoped that this document assists Christian doctors/dentists to maintain integrity and professionalism.

Modified from the Christian Medical and Dental Association (CMDA-US) Position Statement on 'Doctor & Pharmaceutical/Medical Device Industry Relationships' by the CMDFA Ethics Management Team on 15 September 2022 with permission from CMDA.

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