

Ethics 101 Response – Working with industry representatives

In general, I would tell my colleague that decisions to participate in this sort of event are personal decisions and each physician must make a decision with which he or she is comfortable. That said, it is important for my colleague to realize that there is frequently much more going on with such events than initially appreciated.

Combining education with marketing is a very common strategy employed by industry. While there may be a real educational benefit to the event, the reason for including us is not altruistic.

As physicians, we are very attractive to pharmaceutical companies. We prescribe medications for a third party. Convincing one physician to prescribe a medication, may lead to dozens (or even hundreds) of prescriptions for long term use. Moreover, convincing one high profile/opinion leader physician of the benefit of a medication may lead to many physicians adopting a new treatment, thus multiplying exponentially the potential number of prescriptions. So spending \$5000-\$10,000 on a physician can be money very well spent.

Of course, most of us will argue that just because we accept a dinner, or golf game or trip to New York, does not mean we are going to adopt the company's product. In fact, we argue that it is insulting to think we can be bought off by such gimmicks. This argument is based on an important misconception. It is not about being bought off or bribed. Even the most morally dubious physician would have second thoughts about prescribing a medication just for a financial kick-back.

What is actually going on in these scenarios is more subtle. Industry is exploiting societal conventions regarding obligation and reciprocity. Sociologists point out that "gift exchange underlies the human tendency to engage in networks of obligation". A gift or favor of any size creates an unconscious urge to reciprocate. That is why when someone does us a favor, *we* feel the urge to say "thank you" or "much obliged". These techniques are used in sales all the time. Common examples of this are door-to-door salesmen who give away "free" samples in order to be able to get into the house and make their pitch. People selling "Holiday Time Shares" will often provide "free" food or other benefits in order to obtain your loyalty and attention. Even the War Amps exploit this social convention when they send you unsolicited key tags or labels, knowing that you will feel a sense of obligation to support their charity.

These techniques are employed all the time in business. So what is the big deal when it comes to medicine, you might ask? There is nothing "morally wrong" in accepting this trip to New York. What is important is that we realize there is more going on here than meets the eye. We must realize that regardless what we say to ourselves about our objectivity, impartiality and independence, accepting a junket, even an educational one, creates a sense of obligation, perhaps just enough to generate a sense of goodwill towards the company's product. We are not being bought off by these events, but we are being subtly manipulated to being more receptive to the message. It is a little harder to say "no thank you" to someone who has just bought us a coffee.

Finally, there are a number of interesting studies, which indicate that most physicians think they themselves are not influenced by such gimmicks, but they do acknowledge that many of their colleagues may be. This goes to show that bias is frequently easily recognized in others, but not in ourselves.

– Dr. Wayne Rosen, Clinical Assistant Professor of Surgery, University of Calgary