

POINT

“Pharm Free” is the Way to Be (...There is no Such Thing as a “Free Lunch”)

Punal Patel, MD; James Gee, MD; and Kevin Olden, MD

Dr. Patel is chief resident, Dr. Gee is a PGY-2, and Dr. Olden is vice chair of internal medicine at St. Joseph's Hospital & Medical Center in Phoenix, AZ.

As physicians, we are trained to contemplate the risks versus benefits of almost all encounters. It's second nature; it's engraved. It's as if we cannot function without debating the risks, benefits, and alternatives of every situation we encounter.

However, how often do you find yourself pondering the pharmaceutical company-sponsored pizza or pasta you had for lunch? And that it will, inevitably, influence your practice, affect your credentials, and comprise your integrity? In residency, our salaries are disproportionate to our debt. We look for as many places to cut costs as possible, and traditionally, lunch has been one of them. Just keep in mind that there is no such thing as a “free lunch.”

How does this work? Accessibility is the key. Pharmaceutical representatives are notorious for extracting data collected by the hospital and networking with nurses to identify prescribing practices. For instant networking, representatives can navigate through cafepharma.com, which is a website dedicated to pharmaceutical and medical sales professionals.

Back to that innocent pharmaceutical company-sponsored lunch. If you sign your name on their attendance document, you are guaranteed a blog on their infamous networking website, cafepharma.com. Keep in

mind that your patients can visit this website. As an extrapolation, your patients are now privy to your affiliations and how they may influence your prescribing practices. Not only do you lose your credibility, but more importantly you lose your patients' trust in you.

How are pharmaceutical companies regulated? The Corporate Integrity Agreement, also known as the CIA, protects the integrity of the Department of Health and Human Service programs. This is a federal act that sanctions companies that violate marketing rules. The CIA is a restrictive agreement that is imposed when misconduct is discovered on behalf of pharmaceutical companies.¹

“Physicians who accept speaking fees and meals from pharmaceutical companies are revealed on the Web...drawing attention to such financial benefits.”² The Physician Payment Sunshine Act requires manufacturers and group purchasing organizations to report all physician payments over a cumulative value of \$100. This information is also available to your patients on the Web.

How can you limit this access? In teaching institutions, we can restrict the access that pharmaceutical companies have to our department. In other words, they can be prohibited from extracting information from the

program coordinator, or vice versa the program coordinator can withhold information. Additionally, representatives can be excluded geographically; access to the actual conference room can be restricted. Furthermore, you can choose to remain anonymous or offer to pay for your own lunch. As I stated before, there is no such thing as a “free lunch.”

I believe that the conflict between medical professionals and the pharmaceutical industry will be everlasting. When you expose yourself to the pharmaceutical industry, any gift large or small can influence your decision making, which can conflict with the patient care that you provide. Therefore, to refrain from compromising your integrity, credibility, and your patients' trust in you, you must remain “pharm free.”

References

1. Corporate Integrity Agreements. Office of Inspector General, US Department of Health and Human Services. <http://oig.hhs.gov/compliance/corporate>. Accessed March 26, 2012.
2. Weintraub A. New health law will require industry to disclose payments to physicians. Kaiser Health News. Accessed March 26, 2012.