

# Opinion

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## Do Conflict of Interest Statements Bore You?

**I**n last issue's Opinion, I discussed the new PhRMA guidelines covering gifts and perks given to physicians by drug companies. Gifts of substantive value clearly create a conflict of interest between the physician's self-interest and the interests of patients. What about conflicts of interest that impair honest communication among

colleagues about scientific matters and research results? A couple of scenarios will help to illustrate the problem.

Consider the case of a local eye society that invites a speaker from a "speakers' bureau" list provided by a pharmaceutical company. The company covers the speaker's expenses and honorarium, and the speaker discloses that fact to those in attendance. (I hope there's nothing wrong so far, since I've done a number of these myself.) Let's assume the speaker provides an unbiased opinion about the prostaglandin analogues, declaring that they are more alike than they are different, despite the strident claims of the detail people. In the audience sits a representative of the sponsor.

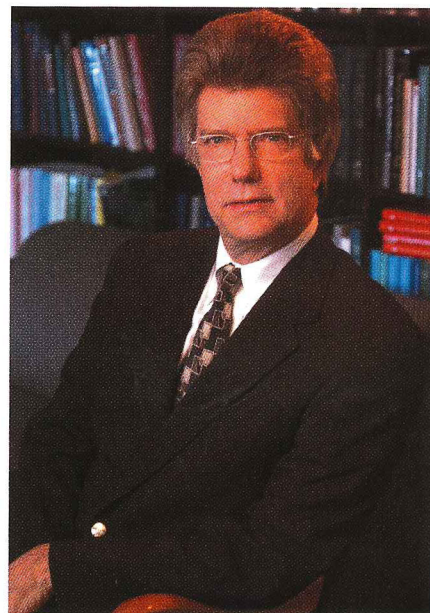
Later, the speaker may find his or her name mysteriously omitted from the speakers' bureau. Thus, over time, the speakers' bureau consists mainly of experts who tend to interpret the available data in a way favorable to the sponsor.

How about the researcher whose work is vital to a drug company, and who serves as an investigator with grant support or a consultant for products in the pipeline? It is customary for the

company to require that the researcher execute a nondisclosure agreement so that the company's proprietary secrets are not revealed to the competition. Usually, such agreements also contain the provision that the company controls the data and has the right to decide whether the data is ever published. So if negative results are obtained, the company may never reveal them to the public, and the researcher is prevented from informing colleagues, even verbally, though he or she is an acknowledged expert.

The usual remedy for such conflicts is disclosure, so that the audience can decide whether the opinions they are hearing may be biased. The Academy requires disclosure of conflicts of interest in all presentations at the Annual Meeting and in its publications. These disclosures are voluntary, but if failure to disclose is later discovered, penalties can be severe. Disclosure is a serious matter and requires the same attention from the audience as it does the speaker. Be sure you pay close attention when these often boring disclosures are made because they *should* influence your opinion of the credibility of the information.

One final observation. All of us have ego investment in our ideas and accomplishments. It's an investment of emotional capital rather than a purchase of stock, but an investment nonetheless. The presenter realizes that without enthusiastic advocacy, an idea is likely to be lost in the cacophony of new information. But the presenter of a research discovery, or a new surgical technique, has an inherent conflict of interest because of that investment. It's a conflict of self-interest and the interests of the audience for dispassionate science. Fortunately, this conflict does not require disclosure; we all understand it intuitively. But it might explain why most of us ophthalmologists are closet skeptics.



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