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OPEN LETTER TO THE GENERAL MEDICAL COUNCIL

Why the GMC should set up a central registry of doctors’ competing interests

This transparency can only be good for medical practice

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Dear sir

Trust between patients and doctors is critical to good medical practice, and doctors are still highly trusted by the public.1 But we should ensure that we deserve it. The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry has estimated that the drug industry pays £40m (£48m; $65m) a year to doctors for speaking fees, flights, hotels, and other travel expenses.2 Yet who is being paid what is opaque. It is clear that exposure to pharmaceutical advertising adversely affects future prescribing.3 4 There is also evidence that if doctors accept gifts from the drug industry, patients trust doctors less.5 Citizens can access MPs’ central register of their financial conflicts of interest,6 yet patients cannot find out whether their doctor has a financial conflict of interest. The vast majority of doctors will be receiving no payments from any organisation other than their employer or the NHS. Some will receive fees for their expertise from NHS or non-NHS organisations. Others will be receiving some pharmaceutically sponsored education. A few will be receiving large sums for assisting pharmaceutical or other companies with their profile and sales of their products.

The General Medical Council (GMC) says, “You must be honest in financial and commercial dealings with patients, employers, insurers and other organisations or individuals . . . If you are faced with a conflict of interest, you must be open about the conflict, declaring your interest formally, and you should be prepared to exclude yourself from decision making.”7 Yet there is no formal way to declare such interests, especially when conflicts may subtly influence a doctor’s practice—such as small gifts from the drug industry. The lack of a system to document payments means that patients cannot routinely be informed whether their doctor receives benefits from companies that may affect their prescribing.

Given the evidence, patients should be able to know when drug companies are influencing and paying their doctors. Nor is promotion by the industry the only concern. A burgeoning public relations and media relations industry pays doctors to promote products from hand creams to foodstuffs. Surely the financial transactions that underpin these promotions should be made obvious to potential customers and patients? Similarly, the Advertising Standards Authority has admonished many clinics for unfair advertising of products and unfair practices. Yet the monetary relations concerning the doctors promoting these products have not been made explicit.

There is a need for change. The current system of self declaration is variable, opaque, and unreliable. Investigations into the “hospitality registers” of Scottish hospitals have found a paucity of information about payments to doctors.8 Although the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry has said, in personal communications, that it proposes to make details into the “hospitality registers” of Scottish hospitals have found a paucity of information about payments to doctors. Although academics and journals have led on declarations of competing interest, they are inconsistent (some interests are mentioned on some papers and not on others). It is unrealistic to expect that patients, or indeed colleagues, will
have access to this information or should be responsible for
gathering and interpreting it.

All doctors already reflect on their probity when undergoing
annual appraisal. It would serve the interests of transparency to
share these conclusions easily with peers and patients.

We would discourage the long and potentially irresolvable
discussion about what does or does not represent a conflict or
interest (membership of a political party, board membership of
a charity, ownership of a nursing home, or ownership of a
primary care service while working as a commissioner of care).
Rather, we suggest that patients may be good judges of this.
Moving from the notion of an academic conflict of interest being
something “that would embarrass you if it were to emerge after
publication and you had not declared it”9 the question should
become, “Is there anything that would embarrass your
relationship with your patients or the public if you do not declare
it now?” Although having an interest is not necessarily by itself
a problem, failure to disclose some declarations might be. It is
likely that doctors’ professionalism would lead to more
over-declaration than under-declaration. However, patients are
most likely to be concerned about payments from the industry,
PR companies, and declarations of interest over commissioning
of services.

Some of us have already met representatives of your
organisation to consider whether the GMC is the most
appropriate body to hold a list of declarations of interest, updated
annually, alongside details of our qualifications and registration
status. Although we urge the GMC to consult on this, we
appreciate that this step change may cause concerns for some.
For most doctors a declaration of interests would be simple and
straightforward, containing little or nothing of particular
concern. For a few it would make it clear to patients and
colleagues who the paid opinion leaders are and whose advice
on health interventions may be influenced by payments from
the manufacturer. This transparency can only be good for
medical practice. It may cause discomfort for a few but would
enhance trust in the profession as a whole.

To enable doctors to register their declarations of interests
publicly, we have meanwhile created a pilot website, www.
whopaysthisdoctor.org, designed to allow a simple download
for the probity section of our annual appraisals. We invite
doctors to use the website and hope that they and their patients
will find it useful. We anticipate that, in time, a public
declaration of interests will be seen as the right thing for all
professionals to make.

Competing interests: All the signatories’ declarations of interests can
be found at www.whopaysthisdoctor.org.

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