Drug company sponsorship of education could be replaced at a fraction of its cost

Ray Moynihan *Washington, DC*

The head of the main medical education accrediting body in the United States says that many commercially sponsored educational events could be run at a fraction of their cost, without unnecessary extras such as expensive lunches and entertainment.

The chief executive officer of the Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education, Dr Murray Kopelow, said, "It's possible that a significant reduction in the amount spent on an educational event would not result in a significant loss in educational opportunity."

More than half of the \$1.4bn (£0.9bn; €1.2bn) spent on accredited continuing medical education in the United States is now funded from commercial sources, including drug companies and device manufacturers, and concerns are growing that the boundaries between education and promotion have become blurred.

The powerful accreditation body is currently reviewing the national rules on commercial

support, to try to manage the growing entanglement between sponsors and educators and to provide unbiased curricula. The review has made it clear that much commercial support for education is not actually spent on education.

Dr Kopelow, a paediatrician before he became an education executive, cited a recent example of more than \$100 000 of commercial support being directed at a two hour long "educational opportunity" for 100 people. "Maybe only \$20 000 was spent bringing speakers, hiring the space, and advertising it," he said. "A lot of other funds were spent on amenities, visual aids, more promotion, meals, and entertainment."

He continued: "The quality of the educational opportunity is dependent on how well designed the education is and how well matched it is to the needs of the learners. The quality of the amenities and the meal are not critical to that."

Some institutions have already reduced their depen-

dence on commercial support. At the Chicago Medical School of Finch University of Health Sciences, psychiatrist Frederick Sierles replaced company sponsorship with internal departmental funding when he took over responsibility for education four years ago. "Now we have an annual budget of just on \$8000 to cover payments to invited lecturers and speakers," said Dr Sierles, a member of the reform group No Free Lunch, which advocates greater reliance among doctors on unbiased sources of information that are free from commercial influence.

Dr Kopelow contends that commercially supported education can be unbiased, but he wel-

comes the move to funding that is more independent: "Anything that enhances independence is a valuable development, and that strategy is fulfilled by making an event free of commercial support."

Responding to calls from organisations such as No Free Lunch to move away from drug company funding of education altogether, Dr Kopelow floated the possibility of a "blind trust," whereby companies could contribute to a national pool of funds that are then distributed to educational providers.

● Vote on whether doctors and drug companies are too close for comfort in this week's straw poll on bmj.com □

The quality of the meal is not critical to education, says US expert

Drug companies advised to publish unfavourable trial results

Debashis Singh *London*

New guidelines aimed at increasing transparency and encouraging the responsible and ethical reporting of industry sponsored clinical trials have been published in *Current Medical Research and Opinion* (2003;19:149-54), a peer reviewed international journal that focuses on evidence based clinical studies, research investigations, and experimental treatments.

Although not commissioned by the pharmaceutical industry itself, the article presents the first set of guidelines developed by members of the industry (as well as journal editors and academics) for the industry itself.

The "good publication practice" (GPP) guidelines seek

greater transparency by addressing two main themes: publication bias and the relationship between drugs companies and academic investigators.

The guidelines call on companies to publish results of all their clinical trials of marketed products, including trials with unfavourable findings—something drug companies have been criticised for failing to do in the past.

The guidelines also recommend practical steps to reduce publication bias and redundant publication, such as multiple presentations of the same trial results.

A unique feature of the guidelines—one not covered by existing guidelines from journal editors—is that they address the

role of professional medical writers and, especially, writers' interactions with authors. Professional writers work for the drugs industry and are used to ease the publication of trials.

The guidelines are voluntary and aspirational rather than obligatory, and there is no mechanism for policing them. Of the 75 pharmaceutical companies that have so far been informed of the guidelines, only six have endorsed them.

Even endorsing the guidelines does not put the drug company under any obligation to follow them and to publish trials with unfavourable results. However, they can be seen as a first step in establishing a common standard and are intended to complement other guidelines, such as the uniform requirements for submission of manuscripts to biomedical journals issued by the International Committee of Medical Journal Edi-

tors and the CONSORT guidelines for accurate reporting of randomised control trials.

Liz Wager, a member of the team that developed the guidelines, said, "We want the guidelines to be a 'one stop shop' for people working in or for drug companies. Until now you had to look all over the place for relevant information. Even the best guidelines did not cover all the issues. We hope that good publication practice will become widely accepted and implemented throughout the industry."

Professor Joe Collier, editor of the *Drug and Therapeutics Bulletin*, said, "The more open the industry the better. This is an aspirational agreement, and I suspect there may be loopholes in the arrangement, with companies not publishing material when it doesn't suit them." □

Further details of the guidelines are at www.gpp-guidelines.org