Roche defends buying lavish meals for doctors at Sydney's restaurants

Ray Moynihan *Byron Bay, Australia*

The Swiss drug giant Roche has been accused of breaching the pharmaceutical industry's code of conduct by providing lavish meals to doctors at several of Australia's leading restaurants.

The dinners were part of a Roche sponsored scientific symposium on haematology-oncology treatments, which included the company's top selling pharmaceutical, rituximab (MabThera), which has annual sales of more than SFr4bn (£1.8bn; €2.6bn; \$3.2bn).

According to documents obtained by the *BMJ*, Roche spent more than \$A65000 (£27 000; €39 000; \$49 000) on one meal for almost 300 people at the Guillaume at Bennelong restaurant, in the Sydney Opera House in July 2005.

With spectacular views over Sydney harbour, the restaurant is considered one of Australia's best, boasting the "degustation menu" with multiple courses and fine wines, worth \$A200 a head. The menu currently features dishes including sterling caviar, basil infused tuna, kingfish sashimi, and the best of Australian and French wines.

The industry's code of conduct in Australia states "for educational meetings directly organised by, and the responsibility of companies, all hospitality must be simple and modest" and that interactions with doctors should "successfully withstand public and professional scrutiny."

The night after the Guillaume at Bennelong meal, Roche funded a dinner for a select gathering of doctors and company representatives at the Boathouse, another leading harbourside restaurant. In this case it seems a meal for about 16 people cost Roche more than \$A2000, which included snapper pie and nine bottles of wine, including a superior Kooyong pinot noir, valued at \$A85 a bottle.

A third meal took place the next evening in a private function room with views of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, at an exclusive restaurant called Aria. About 18 people dined on seafood, with drinks including pinot noir and gin, at a total cost of more than \$A4000.

According to someone who accompanied a doctor to all three dinners, a small number of partners were present on each occasion, and in one case a child was also present.

In response to questions from *BMJ*, Roche said that the company believes "the dinners were appropriate when held in conjunction with a scientific meeting of this type. The dinners did not contain entertainment and were in line with the Medicines Australia code of conduct." Roche's statement continued, "Participants were not paid for their time and as the educational content was rigorous and the days were long, it seems reasonable to us that a dinner of this type was on

offer at the end of such an educational day."

On the question of partners, a spokesperson for Roche said that two partners were present, and on one occasion a child was present. In the case of the two partners, the spokesperson said that the company had sought to retrieve payment for the meals, but had so far been unsuccessful because of two separate divorce proceedings. In the case of a child being present at one of the meals, the spokesperson explained that a hotel babysitter for a foreign visitor had been cancelled at the last minute.

Based in Switzerland, Roche had global annual sales last year of more than SFr35bn and profits of almost SFr7bn. Sales of its anti-cancer drugs rose a staggering 42% between 2004 and 2005.

Peter Mansfield, from the global drug marketing watchdog Healthy Skepticism, believes that

Roche has breached the industry's code of practice and will complain this week to the industry's representative body, Medicines Australia.

As part of his complaint, Dr Mansfield questioned several companies about their policies on lavish meals. He is concerned that the companies may not have the capacity to enforce their industry's code, as none has disclosed limits on what they will spend on doctors' meals.

An ethicist and haematologist from the University of Sydney, Ian Kerridge, said that lavish wining and dining is still common practice for doctors who prescribe expensive cancer drugs. He says that such events are designed to build trust with doctors and ultimately make them "less rigorously critical." He questioned whether the recent tightening of ethical codes is having any impact. □

Roche took 18 doctors to the Aria restaurant overlooking Sydney Harbour for dinner at £90 a head

Report demands investigation into rise in preterm births

Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

The rate of preterm births in the United States has increased by more than 30% since 1981, says a report from the US Institute of Medicine, part of the National Academy of Sciences. In 1981, 9.4% of US babies were born before 37 weeks' gestation. By

2004, this had risen to 12.5%—about 500 000 infants.

Children born prematurely are at higher risk of death and health and developmental problems. The report estimates the cost to US society of births before 37 weeks is \$26bn (£14bn; €21bn) a year, or \$51 600 an infant. It includes medical care for the mother and the infant, lost household income and labour productivity, early interventions, and special education. It does not include costs after the age of 5 years or care for lifelong disabilities.

The report calls for an urgent national investigation into the

causes, diagnosis, and prevention of preterm births. Although infants born before 32 weeks are at greatest risk for disease and death, those born between 32 and 37 weeks have more complications than infants born at term.

"One half of cerebral palsy cases are preterm. One quarter of mentally retarded infants are preterm. One quarter of those with hearing disabilities, and one quarter of those with vision disabilities are preterm," said Dr Norman Waitzman, an economist at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City.

Researchers said that the problem has not received atten-

tion because the people affected are young families with little political clout. Furthermore, miracle stories of tiny preterm babies who have survived have led people to think that "it's no big deal."

African-American women have the highest rate of preterm deliveries. In 2003, 17.8% of pregnant African-American women gave birth to a preterm baby, compared with 11.9% of Hispanic women, 11.5% of white women, and 10.5% of Asian women. PH

The report, *Preterm Birth: Causes, Consequences, and Prevention*, is available at www.iom.edu.