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Medical Journals & The Drug Industry: How Full Disclosure Can Help Big Pharma

On several occasions during the summer of 2006, the media has highlighted ties between the pharmaceutical industry and researchers. A key focus of these reports was the fact that a number of authors did not disclose that they received support from drug firms to conduct and publish the results of clinical trials.

Two of these cases were reported by the *Wall Street Journal*. One incident focused on the publication of an article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* on the use of antidepressants by pregnant women. The study authors warned that if these women stopped taking medication they would increase their risk of again suffering from depression. However, the authors did not disclose that they were paid by drug manufacturers. In another instance, a study was published in *Neuropsychopharmacology* touting the use of a widely-debated treatment for refractory or resistant depression. Again, the authors failed to inform the journal of their financial ties to pharmaceutical companies.

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Dr. Catherine DeAngelis, editor of *JAMA*, wrote an editorial that was published in the August 7 edition of the journal examining the “influence of money on medical science.” It is important to note that while DeAngelis is advocating for authors to disclose their relationship with drug companies, she does not consider pharmaceutical industry-supported research to be “automatically flawed.” In her editorial, she notes: [In all cases where *JAMA* highlighted authors’ non-disclosure of industry ties the articles “were all peer reviewed and editorially evaluated and no one has questioned their validity.”

Why It Is In Big Pharma’s Best Interest To Have Physicians Disclose Conflicts Of Interest

Healthcare communications professionals often have the pleasure of helping to publicize studies supported by their pharmaceutical industry clients that were being published in top-notch medical journals. Drug firms’ marketing teams are justifiably excited by the publications as they can further medical science and bolster sales.

However, if it is later revealed that authors did not disclose financial ties to a drug company, it is much harder to leverage clinical trial results to position a drug favorably. It can also significantly damage the credibility of drug firms and the authors – most of which are hard working and ethical professionals. Finally, it can increase the risk of expensive and damaging litigation.

Acceding to medical journals' requests for full disclosure will help drug companies pursue their marketing goals. Take the example of Lipitor, a drug that faces patent challenges and the erosion of its market share due to the introduction of generic cholesterol medications. In August 2006, the *New England Journal of Medicine* published a Pfizer-sponsored study indicating that high doses of Lipitor may help prevent people from suffering a second stroke. Physicians had high praise for the study saying that it may lead to a change in medical guidelines. Pfizer wins because it is conducted an excellent study. Patients win because physicians have another tool to help them avoid a second debilitating stroke.

Full disclosure makes good ethical, marketing and communications sense. It can help increase sales, build trust and improve the poor reputation of the pharmaceutical industry.