

Guest Editorial

PhRMA and the Dermatologist

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While human cloning and stem cell research dominate international bioethics discussions, a major advance in bioethics this summer may have passed relatively unnoticed by dermatologists. In recent years, dermatologists vigorously discussed the ethics of selling nonprescription health products in their offices, experimenting on human subjects, as well as accepting gifts from pharmaceutical industry representatives. Discussion of the latter took a significant and admirable step toward action on July 1, 2002.

At the beginning of last summer, PhRMA (Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America) voluntarily adopted a very significant Code on Interactions With Healthcare Professionals (available at <http://www.phrma.org>). PhRMA represents most of the pharmaceutical industry, including AstraZeneca; Eli Lilly and Company; Fujisawa Healthcare, Inc.; and Merck & Co., among others. The code states the PhRMA commitment to ethical interactions with healthcare professionals that are “intended to benefit patients and to enhance the practice of medicine.” Moreover, the code offers specific guidelines for reaching this goal. The sponsoring of educational activities for physicians and the distribution of items benefiting patient care remain acceptable practices; however, the provisions of entertainment and personal gifts for physicians are explicitly prohibited.

Under section 7C, the code states that: “Items intended for the personal benefit of healthcare professionals (such as floral arrangements, artwork, music CDs, or tickets to a sporting event) should not be offered.” Similarly, the code proscribes compensation for so-called consulting activities when the number or composition of the consultants does not match the company’s needs or the compensation is out of proportion to the consultant’s

contributions. Items valued at less than \$100 that primarily benefit patients, such as anatomical models, may be offered occasionally to physicians.

The code represents a significant and admirable move toward more ethical behavior in physician-industry relations. It clearly discourages many unjustifiable abuses. As a collective statement, it is much more likely to attract support and adherence by all members of the pharmaceutical industry than if issued by one or only a few corporations.

Despite the laudable aspects of the PhRMA code, its announcement somehow remains unsettling. Why? It is the voluntary—rather than mandatory—nature of the statement and the realization that the pharmaceutical industry itself, not members of the medical profession, felt the need to institute such a code. For years, many of us have been too comfortable and quick to accept the myriad gifts and honoraria offered by pharmaceutical industry representatives. More foresight into the implications and effects of such gifts on our ability to make independent decisions and, more importantly, the maintenance of our professional integrity, could have obviated the need for such a code.

The introduction of the PhRMA Code on Interactions With Healthcare Professionals provides an excellent opportunity for dermatologists to reevaluate their interactions with pharmaceutical companies and representatives. Embracing these voluntary guidelines will go far toward enhancing our personal and professional integrity. Physician support will ensure that the code moves from a voluntary guide to the standard of practice. In addition, some physicians may want to use this opportunity to critically examine the nature and utility of information obtained through pharmaceutical representatives. Clearly those who research and develop new medications have much to offer our profession and our patients; it remains our responsibility, however, to guarantee that such benefits are accrued in the most effective and ethical manner possible.

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