



Putting the Patient First by Addressing Industry Practices

Does the relationship between the pharmaceutical industry and healthcare professionals (HCPs) need to change? Does it generate a real or perceived conflict of interest?

This is the challenge that representatives from GSK, the International Alliance of Patients' Organisations (IAPO), the World Medical Association (WMA) and Transparency International UK debated on 25th May 2016, in the sidelines of the World Health Assembly.

The ensuing discussion focused on a range of issues including the appropriateness of the existing industry commercial model, how to safeguard ethical collaborations, the provision of medical education and the need for transparency in the healthcare sector.

The Context

When someone visits their doctor they expect the advice and treatment recommendations they receive to be

based on their medical needs and their doctor's understanding of their condition and the treatment options available. Any question of conflict of interest between a doctor and the companies that develop treatments, could undermine the trust patients have in those treatment decisions. HCPs are not the source of this problem but they can be part of the solution.

Doctors and other HCPs are valued partners for industry, providing companies with scientific and medical expertise and insights into patient care. Equally, companies have an important role to play in providing doctors with information about their medicines. This close relationship between HCPs and industry is fundamental to the progress of medical science and to help meet patient and public health needs. But it must be conducted clearly, transparently and in a way that creates confidence amongst stakeholders.

Companies paying HCPs to speak on their behalf and to attend medical

conferences are established industry practices and have played an important role in supporting HCP education. However paying HCPs for promotional activity who also prescribe – or influence prescribing – of that company's products could lead others to question whether a conflict of interest exists in this relationship.

Increased transparency around payments to HCPs by companies is an important step in the right direction. But even when such payments are publically disclosed, does a risk still remain?

HCPs undoubtedly make good and independent decisions with the best interests of their patients at heart. However even a perception of conflict of interest can undermine the trust that patients have in their HCPs and industry must work to safeguard against that. This is in everyone's interests.

It was against this background of current industry practices that the Panel met on 25th May,

Danie du Plessis

GSK

"If patients trust doctors, doctors trust the industry, patients trust the medicines they are prescribed and society trusts that the data we present is appropriate, we can create meaningful change. Our relationship with HCPs is particularly important, and we are not walking away from that. We will continue to interact with healthcare professionals, both from a sales force perspective, but also from a medical perspective. As an innovation and science based company of course we will continue clinical trials, advisory boards and to support medical education, but in different ways than in the past. The most important relationship is that between physician and patients and as an industry we need to be careful not to interfere there. Where we do have a role is helping to provide information in an appropriate way to prescribers. We will do this in a way that is transparent, and allows us to continue providing information in a fair balanced and objective way, and that is why we have stopped paying HCPs directly to speak on our behalf."



Dr Matthias Wienold

International Alliance of Patients' Organisations (IAPO)

"We need to really push the idea that ethical research and innovation are necessary and need to be supported. To achieve this we must maintain the independence and ethical conduct not only of research but of all business, and we are all in the business of promoting transparency and accountability of what we do. We also want to move forward in a way that professionals are rewarded for what they do for the patient. It is very important that we advise physicians and nurses not to leave the impression that they are only promoting a certain product. Their mission should be patient centred care. We also support interactions between industry and healthcare partners being made transparent. So that patients are given complete and relevant information in a way that they can access and understand. So it's not the question of do we have the right to see something, but is the information shared in a transparent and clear way?"

Dr Julia Tainijoki-Seyer

World Medical Association (WMA)

"Think about how many medicines there are. There can be several for just one diseases, and there are many diseases. So when a new medication is approved we [HCPs] need support from the pharmaceutical industry to explain to us its advantages, disadvantages and for which patient it is appropriate. Also, while there is some free continuous medical education, you need to pay for most of it and this can create an unethical situation especially in poorer countries. So we need to find a way to better support information sharing and education. This is not only for the pharmaceutical industry to drive, but for all the different healthcare players and educators. If those parties get together, then we can do research, we can improve diagnostics, procedures, treatment, and we can actually achieve advances in medicine. For this we need to define and set the principles of how this relationship should work in an ethical way that best benefits all parties, and especially patients."



Sophie Peresson

Transparency International UK

"Transparency and accountability are essential in the relationship between healthcare professionals and the industry. They ensure that industry and healthcare professionals can answer to those who are affected by their decisions and actions. That way we can establish what we need to do and who we need to work with to create an enabling environment for change that will really tackle these issues head on. Change people can see, measure and be motivated by. Broadening the discussion around issues such as conflict of interest to groups like Transparency International, academia and other policy makers can enhance research, policy recommendations and education. Particularly for patients and advocates to lead to meaningful change. The ultimate aim of this change, of course, should be to have trust between healthcare professionals and patients, improve their ability to make informed choices, and to have patient centred care."