



Residents' Page

Whose pen is in your pocket?

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A few months ago, I was working in rural Alberta on a family medicine rotation. The rotation design split our time between the office and the emergency department. One night, while wandering the hospital after hours, I got a call to see a patient in the emergency room. Upon arrival, I spoke with the charge nurse and learned that the patient was an 8-year-old child, Kristina, who had had a cough for the past 2 days. I received the chart and noticed that the box indicating whether the child had been immunized was not checked. In a meeting with the Medical Officer of Health the week before, I had learned that the immunization rates were low in this region and that there had been recent outbreaks of pertussis.

As I walked to the examination room, I mentally formulated a plan on how to address parental misconceptions about vaccines: safety issues, mercury content, natural versus active immunity, immune system overload, autism, and vaccine additives. After examining Kristina, I reassured the mother that the child had a viral illness that would likely improve over the next several days. I then asked, "Has Kristina been vaccinated?"

"No, we chose not to," her mother responded.

"For any particular reason?" I expected a response centring on safety issues.

"Because the doctors giving the vaccines are influenced by the drug companies, and I don't trust them."

"Pardon me?" I asked her to explain her response.

"I worked as a pharmacy technician, and it disgusted me to see how the doctors were so easily influenced by the pharmaceutical representatives: lunches, trinkets, and vacations. If the drug companies control so much of how the doctors prescribe the usual medications, how do I know that vaccine research and the subsequent recommendations aren't controlled by the pharmaceutical industry?"

This particular reason for not vaccinating had not been addressed in my meeting with the Medical Officer of Health. The mother was willing to vaccinate her child but had an inherent distrust of physicians because of the appearance of pharmaceutical companies' influence on the medical profession.

While working in various physicians' offices throughout my training, I have kept a mental note of how the

pharmaceutical industry might be perceived as influencing our practice. The most common such item found in these offices is the pharmaceutical pen. We often write prescriptions for our preferred antihypertensive medication with the name of the newest formulation of antibiotic before us. Surely as a physician I can purchase my own pen. What is on my mouse pad or my favourite coffee mug? Does my stethoscope, reflex hammer, or 10-g monofilament have advertising on it? I have even encountered notepaper, intended to be part of the regular notes kept in patients' medical records, peppered with advertising.

How does it appear to our patients when pharmaceutical advertising is present on the basic tools of our trade? Is there even the slightest implied bias in the choice of medications and, therefore, the medical decisions we are making? The physician-patient relationship is based on trust and a belief that the best decisions are being made for patients without bias. As physicians, it is imperative that we remain impartial in our professional decision making. It is also just as important to maintain the appearance of impartiality. Our actions often speak louder than our words. Keep this in mind the next time you write your prescription with a pharmaceutical pen.

Suggested reading

Canada's Research-Based Pharmaceutical Companies (Rx&D). *Code of conduct*. Ottawa, Ont: Canada's Research-Based Pharmaceutical Companies; updated 2006. Available from: http://www.canadapharma.org/Industry_Publications/Code_of_Conduct_e_2006.pdf. Accessed 2006 Feb 1.

Canadian Medical Association. *Code of ethics*. Ottawa, Ont: Canadian Medical Association; updated 2004. Available from: <http://policybase.cma.ca/PolicyPDF/PD04-06.pdf>. Accessed 2006 Feb 1.

Canadian Medical Association. *Physicians and the pharmaceutical industry*. Ottawa, Ont: Canadian Medical Association; updated 2001. Available from: http://www.cma.ca//multimedia/staticContent/HTML/N0/12/where_we_stand/physicians_and_the_pharmaceutical_industry.pdf. Accessed 2006 Feb 1.

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