

Improving transparency in the pharmaceutical industry

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Medicines Australia represents many of the companies that develop new prescription medicines. It believes that companies' interactions with Australian healthcare professionals have a high degree of ethical integrity. This stems from both the Medicines Australia Code of Conduct¹ and complementary ethical standards developed and adopted by the professions. Based on these ethical standards, there should be a high level of community trust in the industry and healthcare professionals. However, interactions between pharmaceutical companies and healthcare professionals have been subject to negative perceptions. This is despite changes to the Code of Conduct over the last decade.

As an industry, we need to take some responsibility for these negative perceptions and any resulting erosion of trust. We have not done as good a job as we might have in explaining why companies and healthcare professionals interact, how they interact, how our interactions contribute to better patient care and the standards industry adheres to when engaging with healthcare professionals. Medicines Australia seeks to uphold and strengthen community trust in the pharmaceutical industry and our engagement with healthcare professionals. One way Medicines Australia is doing this is by being more transparent about these interactions.

With the introduction of the latest edition of the Code of Conduct in May 2015,¹ the industry is striving to be more open, more transparent and more communicative about interactions between companies and healthcare professionals. The new Code requires Medicines Australia's member companies to publish information about individual healthcare professionals (including doctors, pharmacists, nurses, dentists and dietitians) who receive a 'reportable payment'. Reportable payments are fees for a healthcare professional's advice or service, such as an honorarium, consulting or sitting fee, and the provision of airfares, accommodation or registration fees to enable a healthcare professional to engage in education. The cost of food and beverages provided during educational meetings is not reportable for individual healthcare professionals. Reportable payments will be published every six months on companies' websites while Medicines Australia investigates establishing a central reporting system for all companies' reports.

Companies are responsible for reporting payments associated with company-initiated activities and meetings, whether these are organised directly or by another company or agency. If a company provides sponsorship to a college or society to hold its own educational meeting, these sponsorships will be separately reported, by event, in reports published on Medicines Australia's website.

When Medicines Australia developed the new Code of Conduct, there was considerable debate about whether healthcare professionals should be able to 'opt out' of their payments being reported. However, the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, the Royal Australasian College of Physicians, the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, the Society of Hospital Pharmacists of Australia and consumer organisations such as the Consumers Health Forum of Australia had strong views against an 'opt-out' clause. Disclosing reportable payments will therefore become mandatory.

From 1 October 2015, Medicines Australia's member companies started to collect information about reportable payments to individual healthcare professionals. At first this information will only be publicly reported for each healthcare professional with their consent. The first reports will be published on companies' websites by 31 August 2016. After a year's transition, payments will be reported without seeking consent. Healthcare professionals will be notified of the reporting requirement when they receive a reportable payment. From 1 October 2016, healthcare professionals' details will be disclosed whenever a reportable payment is made.

The new measures are an important step forward for industry, healthcare professionals and importantly Australian patients. They are part of a movement towards more transparency which is also underway in the USA, across Europe and in Japan.

Medicines Australia supports greater transparency in companies' relationships with healthcare professionals. Our ultimate goal is for the degree of transparency required by the Medicines Australia Code of Conduct to be normal, expected business practice for the entire Australian medicines and medical devices industry. Medicines Australia would encourage and support other industry sectors, such as the medical devices, generic medicines, over-the-

counter medicines and complementary medicines, to follow this lead towards greater transparency about their interactions with healthcare professionals. ◀

Conflict of interest: Deborah Monk is Director, Compliance at Medicines Australia.

REFERENCE

1. Medicines Australia. Code of Conduct. 18th ed. 2015. <https://medicinesaustralia.com.au/code-of-conduct/code-of-conduct-current-edition> [cited 2016 Jul 1]