



89. Marketing disguised as academia

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Background

In contrast to other professions, medicine constantly arouses great interest in the public. Research has indicated that more medical information is consumed by the public than any other field in the media, including politics and defense. The explanation given is that medicine is practical and touches upon each and every one of us.

It is not surprising that this yearning for information has been identified by both advertisers and pharmaceuticals companies. We are recently witness to the amazing growth of various kinds of "health supplements", which accompany most of the newspapers in Israel. These supplements combine powerful economic interests: the newspaper enjoys considerable income from pharmaceutical companies, and the pharmaceutical industry receives a stage to promote the medical products that it markets.

In accordance with the law, pharmaceutical companies are forbidden to directly advertise to the consumer the drugs that they manufacture, and in particular the law prohibits the advertising of drugs that are not included in the medication basket in Israel. Consequently, the companies contact physicians, most of whom have a senior and influential professional status, to "academically" present the advantages of their medical product. In this way physicians become a means of permitting covert advertising, and the pharmaceutical companies evade the prohibition included in the law, without the physicians who participate being aware of their part in this process. Since this phenomenon is increasing, a complaint was submitted to the Ethics Board from the legal bureau of the Ministry of Health, with a request to intervene in this matter.

The members of the Ethics Board who discussed the subject attempted, in the rules that appear in the following position paper, to find the required balance between the obligation to supply the maximum amount of medical information to patients regarding every existing medical treatment, whether or not included in the basket, and the preservation of scientific truth. This is done by furnishing balanced and restrained information not intended to serve the economic interests of commercial entities.

The physician is required to employ due diligence regarding any connection he has with a pharmaceutical company. In addition, physicians are required not to exploit this forum for personal publicity that deviates from the provisions of the law and the ethical code and are required to assume responsibility and to evaluate the words presented in their name before their publication.



Position paper

- The advancement of medical knowledge supplied to the general public is currently done, in Israel and abroad, by means of information channels and in the popular press.
- The physician's obligation, pursuant to the law, is to inform the patient about any treatment existing for his illness, even if such treatment is not included in the drugs basket.
- In medical articles intended for the general public, care should be taken to refer to the scientific and medical truth existing at the time of publication.
- Every publication should indicate simultaneously and in a considered manner the other treatment options existing for a specific illness, while maintaining the correct balance between these options.
- In these articles, the generic name of the drug, and not its commercial name, should be used.
- Sweeping recommendations that serve the interests of commercial entities should be avoided in these articles.
- All such articles should include due diligence regarding any possible conflict of interests which the physician may have and regarding any connection between him and the pharmaceutical company or the manufacturer of the medical technology that he refers to in the article.
- Such articles should not be exploited for self publicity, except within the restrictions specified in the law and in the ethical code regarding publicity and advertising.
- It is proper that the physician should approve things brought in his name before their publication.