

Editorial

CAVEAT EMPTOR



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To my mind, the most serious issue in dental publishing today is undeclared conflict of interest. This occurs when authors do not indicate they have a financial interest in companies manufacturing or distributing products mentioned in an article. In this column, I focus on some recent personal experiences that lead me to urge caution in interpreting information as you read journals and attend continuing education courses.

Early this year, I took the trouble to read very carefully 3 articles in a dental commercial publication. It was evident to me that those articles were conceived for one purpose: to laud unreservedly particular, recently launched products. I looked to see if the authors had declared any relationship with any of the companies manufacturing the products mentioned in the articles. There were none. While I had no proof of any conflict of interest, I had a strong suspicion.

This suspicion moved me to share my observations with an e-mail discussion

group. I received a most interesting private response from the president of a company in the dental industry. My correspondent told me that my observation about undeclared conflict of interest was correct, and that a significant number of authors and speakers were being paid by companies. He went on to write that he felt most dentists were unaware that much of what they read and listened to was essentially advertising. Naturally, this one message provided me with no proof or quantification of the problem, it just fuelled my doubts.

I didn't have to wait long to get adequate proof that the standards of transparency in publishing need to be raised. A friend of mine forwarded me an e-mail message he had received from the marketing manager of a company which had just brought out a new material. In this message, the marketing manager wondered if my friend would be interested in writing some articles that would give favourable mention to the material. Of course there would be a decent level of compensation for writing the articles. My friend informed me that this type of arrangement is quite common.

A conversation with a gentleman about my plans for developing the *JCDA* a couple of years ago lends credence to this assertion. When I told this man, who has had a long involvement in the dental industry, that I wanted the *JCDA* to be a good quality peer-reviewed publication in which the financial interests of authors would be declared, he said that I would face an uphill battle. He looked me straight in the eyes and told me that during his career he had witnessed cheques being paid to researchers to change the results of their experiments, so that they would be more favourable to a product.

These are just some examples of how the world works. While I don't know how widespread the problem of undeclared conflict of interest is, I believe we should be on our guard as we educate ourselves about new products and materials. Why has this state of affairs come about?

The competition for your purchasing dollar has heated up. The life cycle of various products and materials has shortened and there is pressure on companies to get out new improved versions on a regular basis. The marketing department probably has more influence than the research and development department in many companies, and marketers are looking for new ways to get their message out. In professional circles, legitimacy is conferred on a new product if respected clinicians write articles favourable to the product. In many cases, the clinician does not have to write the articles; ghost writers can take care of that.

Assuming that financial interest is a fact of life, what can we do about it? The *JCDA* asks all authors to sign a financial disclosure statement (<http://www.cda-adc.ca/jcda/authoring.html>). You see these declarations with many of the articles that appear in the publication. We take the author's declarations at face value; however, if we subsequently found concrete evidence that an author denied having a financial interest where one actually existed, we would have no choice but to publish this new information.

You can bring financial interest out in the open yourselves by asking authors and CE presenters if they have any involvement with the companies manufacturing and distributing the products they write and speak about. To me there is nothing wrong with such involvement, so long as it is declared. Readers and lecture attendees can then make up their own minds about the information they are asked to consider.

I believe it is in the best long-term interest of patients, clinicians and the dental industry that there is transparency in all such dealings. On that positive note, I wish you a very happy and peaceful holiday season.

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