

Acknowledging Support: The Complex Ties between Physician-Scientists and the Pharmaceutical Industry

“This research year was made possible through the Clinical Research Training Program, a public-private partnership supported jointly by the NIH and Pfizer, Inc (via a grant to the Foundation for NIH from Pfizer Inc).” According to the guidelines of my medical student research fellowship, I must attach this one-line statement on all of the work I produce during this year. It is ubiquitous: I must declare it on manuscripts, on scientific posters, and at the beginning of oral presentations. It is a stipulation in my contract that I have this disclosure on all my work during my time at the National Institutes of Health. It is emblazoned in small font on all materials I receive from the NIH Clinical Research Training Program.

I have had moments of ambiguity about this disclosure statement. In the beginning, I wondered if it cast an unflattering light on the results of my research. If people thought that perhaps Pfizer played more than a minor role in the program. I realize the importance of declaring financial ties in scientific work; results should be viewed in their appropriate context, especially if the results may be biased. However, I was unsure whether *I* wanted my research to be evaluated in any context aside from a purely scientific one. After all, it appeared that most of my peers disapproved of activities sponsored by pharmaceutical companies. And what incentive did Pfizer have to fund part of my annual stipend? Why would they provide funds for research endeavors if it would not further their goals?

Being part of a collaboration with a for-profit company made me delve into the complex and long-standing ties between physicians and the pharmaceutical industry. My experiences with the pharmaceutical industry prior to beginning my fellowship were limited—they consisted of receiving free pens, clipboards, notepads, or lunch in exchange for listening to short

presentations on new medications or medical technology. Such a give-and-take relationship seemed relatively clear. When I looked to faculty members for direction regarding the role of industry in a hospital setting, I noticed that they were ambivalent in their feelings toward pharmaceutical companies. On one hand, they applauded them for providing medical supplies for indigent populations and resources for physicians and students. On the other hand, they spoke openly about their disapproval of the role of pharmaceutical companies in the ever-increasing cost of healthcare in the United States. They seemed unsure as to how to teach students to view the pharmaceutical industry, largely because they also were struggling to understand the relationship. As a consequence, I struggled with how to assimilate these incongruous images. Unfortunately, many students, including myself, simply imitated the inconsistencies we saw in our mentors and teachers.

Despite my initial hesitations of disclosing a short one-word statement, my research fellowship illuminated novel facets of the physician-pharmaceutical industry relationship. Pharmaceutical companies play a variety of positive roles that are often unseen by medical students. They provide financial backing for projects that would be difficult to do otherwise. For example, they help pay the salaries of the 30 medical students in my program, while we dedicate a year of our medical education to research. Pfizer does not intervene in the projects we choose, which investigators we work with, and does not review our data. One of the most important tools I have learned from my year of research is critical analysis of research data whether or not it is sponsored by pharmaceutical companies. The research that is produced from collaborations with industry is not inherently biased, but the understanding of always bringing a critical perspective to research is necessary. With appropriate guidelines and physicians trained in how to critically analyze data, collaborations with pharmaceutical companies can be beneficial for

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physicians and pharmaceutical companies. And as an aspiring physician-scientist, I must learn how to set guidelines with the pharmaceutical industry that fosters good research as well as upholds my integrity as a physician.