

Editorial

On Conflict of Interest and Ethics

I RECENTLY attended the annual meeting of a national dental organization, and heard numerous presentations from a wide variety of speakers. One of the presentations featured information on a specific product that the speaker was touting as a “must buy” product, based on his “years of clinical research” on the product. Unfortunately, no research on the product, whether his or from someone else, was presented. This quickly brought to mind one of my pet peeves, which is to hear a presentation at a national or international meeting, have firsthand knowledge that the speaker is being paid an honorarium by a dental manufacturer to present at the meeting (or that he/she was paid to conduct the research), only to have the speaker REFUSE (or knowingly forget) to declare a conflict of interest (COI) to the audience prior to the start of his/her presentation.

To me, this is simply appalling. You might as well be using PhotoShop to alter your clinical photographs without admitting it to the audience. Perhaps I have been in academic dentistry far too long. Our University has had a COI policy for decades, one that each faculty must complete and sign on an annual basis. I, perhaps naively, simply assumed that major dental organizations had a similar COI policy. To my dismay, it appears that many dental organizations either do not have a written policy, or that they elect **NOT** to enforce it.

What has become of honesty, integrity, and professional ethics over the last decade? I have been told that, to get the “top presenters,” sometimes organizations tend to look the other way rather than enforce their COI policies. I say, PICK SOMEONE ELSE TO PRESENT at your meeting!!! Do these presenters (and organizations) think the audience is ignorant of, or oblivious to, these conflicts of interest? How about the members of our various Prosthodontic organizations’ Boards of Directors? Do conflicts of interest occur there? Does your organization have a written Conflict of Interest policy that each Board member must complete each time they meet? Rest assured, the American College of Prosthodontists has one,

the *Journal of Prosthodontics* has one for its authors, and we are currently developing one for our Editorial Board members as well.

What exactly is a conflict of interest? While many definitions have been developed specific to one’s organization or workplace, the basic definition is as follows. The term conflict of interest refers to situations in which financial or other personal considerations or compensation may directly and significantly affect, or have the appearance of affecting, one’s professional judgment in exercising their duties and responsibilities to their organization. Generally speaking, these financial and other personal considerations relate to both the individual and to members of their families.

So, whether you are presenting at a local study club or a national organization’s annual meeting, this basically means that if a company sponsored your research, you have the obligation to **disclose** that information to the audience prior to your presentation. It also means that if a company is paying you an honorarium to present at that meeting, you have the obligation to **disclose** that information as well. And, if you are a paid consultant for that company, you have the obligation to **disclose** that as well. For the author submitting a manuscript for publication, the same rules apply. This also applies to members of the Board of Directors or national dental organizations, and for members of any Editorial Board of the various journals. The audience listening to your presentation, the readers of our journals, and the members of our organizations have the right to know whether the results of research, the content of presentations, the information presented in journal articles, or the decisions being made by the representatives of our national organizations or journals have the potential to be biased by conflicts of interest. Failure to properly disclose this information is, in my opinion, simply unethical. In 2007, we can no longer tolerate this unethical behavior in dentistry.

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