

# Commentary

## Ethical considerations raised by the provision of freebies to veterinary students

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Every first-year veterinary student at Colorado State University is assigned a small desk in a dingy warren in the Anatomy building affectionately known as “the cubes.” These desks are unremarkable in all ways but one: when students first arrive, they find their desks piled high with a variety of freebies—pens, notepads, backpacks, notebooks, highlighters, academic calendars, pet treats, pet food bowls, reference books, and more—all emblazoned with pet food, pharmaceutical, and other corporate brand names from across the veterinary industry. And that is only the beginning.

As the year unfolds, students discover that they are entitled to free and sharply discounted dog, cat, and horse food; free heartworm preventative; a free laboratory coat; and a free clipboard for use in their gross anatomy laboratory. Soon, first-year veterinary students are receiving e-mails through the official veterinary college e-mail distribution list encouraging them to apply to be corporate student representatives for a variety of companies—positions that typically involve little more than distributing additional freebies to their classmates and organizing one or two free lunchtime lectures. In return for their efforts, these student representatives are generally paid between \$750 and \$2,000 per semester. Some companies employ as many as two student representatives in each of the 4 veterinary college classes, whereas others employ only a single representative for each class or a single representative for the entire college. Regardless, the upshot is that there are typically one or two corporate-sponsored free lunches each week for veterinary students, and the corporate presence in the veterinary college is palpable.

Although it is not clear when some of these corporate-sponsored giveaways first began, the freebies and pet food discounts have been provided to students for at least the past five years. Given that most veterinary students are financially strapped and face a challenging academic schedule, the gifts, free food, and stress-free employment are typically greeted with enthusiasm and given little scrutiny.

In addition, the corporate giving appears tacitly sanctioned both by Colorado State University and the AVMA. At least 90% of the funding for the Colorado State University Student Chapter of the AVMA comes from corporate donations, and the donated laboratory

coats have for years been featured in a sort of swearing-in ceremony prior to the start of classes at Colorado State University during which each student signs the Colorado State University veterinary program's honor code.

Despite the popularity of these freebies, questions arise regarding their ethical implications. Specifically, does the provision of these corporate freebies to veterinary students conflict with the professional and ethical obligations veterinarians have to their patients and to society as a whole? It is important to understand the influence these practices might have on the future professional behavior of veterinary students, particularly with regard to impacts on prescribing behavior and recommendations to clients, and to appreciate the possible effects on client perceptions.

### The Influence of a Gift

“As if I'm going to be influenced by a pen” is a common refrain when concerns about the provision of freebies to veterinary students are raised. But social science research has suggested that gifts, no matter how insubstantial, do indeed bestow the giver influence over the recipient.<sup>1-5</sup> Although the veterinary literature contains virtually no references to this issue, research in the human medical profession regarding the influence of corporate gift-giving has shown that gift-giving, even when the gift is as incidental as a pen, establishes a relationship that can influence prescribing behavior and potentially result in negative clinical outcomes.<sup>1-5</sup> Current research suggests that anything that creates a relationship between medical professionals or medical professionals in training and industry can potentially affect prescribing behavior and result in distortions of judgment<sup>6</sup> or even misconceptions about drug efficacy and adverse effects.<sup>7</sup> This phenomenon has been dubbed nonrational prescribing and is the paramount concern repeatedly cited in articles regarding the effects of corporate gift-giving.

The idea that medical professionals could actually be influenced by insubstantial gifts may seem counterintuitive, but studies and surveys have shown that the impulses generated by gift-giving are neither rational nor totally conscious. As suggested by Brennan et al,<sup>8</sup> “Individuals receiving gifts are often unable to remain objective; they reweigh information and choices in light of the gift. So too, those people who give or accept gifts with no explicit ‘strings attached’ still carry an expectation of some kind of reciprocity.”

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Research demonstrates that recipients of small gifts tend to be unaware of any effect the gift might have on their behavior.<sup>6</sup> This lack of conscious perception often makes it difficult to discuss the issue of corporate gift-giving in human and veterinary medicine because the suggestion that these gifts may represent a conflict of interest can sometimes be interpreted as an accusation of bias. When confronted with the ethical issues surrounding corporate gift-giving, gift recipients may become angered by the thought that they would deliberately choose between the cost of the bias (eg, a change in prescribing habits) and the benefit of the reward (ie, the gift received).<sup>6</sup> In actuality, the fact that recipients are generally unaware of any bias is what makes it so difficult to correct for its effects or to avoid conflicts of interest in the first place.<sup>6</sup>

Because even insubstantial gifts can influence physician behavior, Brennan et al<sup>8</sup> recommended that there be stricter regulation of student-industry and physician-industry interactions and suggested that academic medical centers should take the lead to eliminate the conflicts of interest associated with these interactions. In 2007, The Pew Charitable Trusts started The Prescription Project to advance policies that address the conflicts of interest created by drug marketing and increase physician reliance on independent evidence of drug efficacy.<sup>9</sup> The American Medical Student Association established its PharmFree Campaign in 2002 to advocate for establishment of evidence-based, rather than marketing-based, prescribing practices and removal of conflicts of interest in medicine.<sup>10</sup> In 2007, the association released its first PharmFree Scorecard, grading medical schools on their policies regulating interactions—including the provision of gifts, meals, speaking engagements, continuing medical education, consulting relationships, drug samples, and other freebies—between students and faculty and the pharmaceutical and device industries. Although academic centers in the human medical field have made great strides in limiting and regulating these types of interactions in the past five years, the American Medical Association's opinion on gifts to physicians from industry states that “[i]ndividual gifts of minimal value are permissible as long as the gifts are related to the physician's work (eg, pens and notepads).”<sup>11</sup>

### **The Student Factor**

Some may argue that because students are not yet able to prescribe medications or influence clients with recommendations, they should be exempt from strict policies restricting interactions with industry. However, evidence suggests that the habits medical residents develop during their training persist into practice,<sup>12</sup> and a survey<sup>13</sup> of students at the University of Minnesota Medical School found that students were extensively exposed to pharmaceutical marketing during their preclinical and clinical training. Notably, a study<sup>14</sup> of third-year medical students at eight US medical schools found that 80.3% of the students thought they were entitled to receive gifts from drug companies. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents believed that gifts would not influence their practices,

but only 57.7% believed that the same gifts would not influence their colleagues' practices. Additionally, 59.6% of the respondents simultaneously believed that sponsored grand rounds seminars are educationally helpful and likely to be biased.

### **Are Veterinarians Different From Physicians?**

It appears that all of the currently published research regarding the issue of industry influence on medical practice has thus far focused on the human medical profession. The Hippocratic Oath, which physicians recite, is distinctly different from the Veterinarian's Oath,<sup>15</sup> both in style and in substance. Physicians pledge to do no harm, put patients first, and keep patient confidences. Veterinarians pledge to use their scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through the protection of animal health and welfare, the prevention and relief of animal suffering, the conservation of animal resources, the promotion of public health, and the advancement of medical knowledge.

In comparing the professional responsibilities and goals of veterinary medical versus human medical practice, I believe that inherent differences between the two professions argue for greater separation between veterinarians and industry, not less. First, veterinary patients are arguably more vulnerable than most human medical patients, as they cannot advocate for themselves and cannot directly communicate their concerns regarding drug efficacy or tolerability. Second, veterinarians must already balance the potentially conflicting interests of patients, owners, and society as a whole (eg, in regard to public health issues). Adding yet another potential conflict of interest would only make this more difficult. Third, in many instances, veterinarians both prescribe medications and dispense the medications they prescribe. Given this situation, it is even more important that veterinarians obtain drug information from reliable, science-based sources and use that information to make the best treatment choices for their patients and that they avoid any bias, conscious or unconscious, that could potentially arise as a result of corporate gift-giving.

### **Is Pet Food Different From Drugs?**

Even if one accepts that veterinarians have the same or greater conflicts of interest as do physicians when it comes to industry relationships, the question arises as to whether veterinarian relationships with pet food companies are somehow different. After all, animal owners can much more easily choose another dog food than they can choose another drug.

And yet, a number of pet food companies market therapeutic diets that often are available only through a veterinarian, making these diets somewhat akin to prescription medications. In addition, veterinarians, because of their professional standing, can influence owners with regard to the pet foods they choose. I would argue, therefore, that pet food companies could see value in obtaining influence over veterinarians as to the pet foods they recommend.

## **Can Conflicts of Interest Be Resolved by Disclosure?**

One might suggest that disclosing the nature of any conflicts of interest veterinarians might have as a result of corporate gift-giving would be sufficient to allow animal owners to make an informed decision about the advice they receive. Brennan et al,<sup>8</sup> however, have argued that this is an insufficient solution in human medicine because disclosure would typically be incomplete in that physicians differ as to what constitutes a conflict of interest, patients would not be equipped to recognize a biased opinion anyway because of their lack of expertise, and disclosure would come to serve as a convenient excuse to absolve practitioners from any and all conflicts.

Lay articles that address the issue of physician conflicts in prescribing often recommend that consumers protect themselves from corporate influences on prescribing practices by asking their pharmacists whether lower-cost generics are available.<sup>16</sup> In veterinary medicine, however, this is often not possible because veterinarians routinely dispense the medications they prescribe.

Results of a 2008 survey<sup>17</sup> by the Consumer Reports National Resource Center suggested that members of the public already perceive physicians as having too close a relationship with pharmaceutical companies, with two-thirds of those who responded indicating that they thought drugmakers had too much influence on what their doctors prescribed. These findings suggest that disclosure alone would not be sufficient to address patient concerns about conflicts of interest.

## **What Should Be Done?**

The Colorado State University College of Veterinary Medicine is far from the only veterinary school that allows students to receive corporate freebies; indeed, it seems that most US veterinary schools have similar arrangements. One notable exception is the University of California-Davis School of Veterinary Medicine, which recently began operating under a strict Vendor Relations Policy that specifically forbids acceptance of corporate freebies.<sup>18</sup>

In the schools that are not bound by university-wide bans on corporate gifts, most companies do not disclose the amount of money they spend on freebies to veterinary students, citing concerns that the information is proprietary or that disclosure could put them at a competitive disadvantage. In addition, at some universities, there may be some incentive to turn a blind eye to the issue of corporate freebies to veterinary students, as these same companies often help fund vital research, underwrite continuing education programs, and subsidize community-based animal welfare projects.

As of this time, neither the AVMA, American Animal Hospital Association, nor Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges has adopted a policy regarding provision of corporate freebies to students. Given the ethical implications, it would be useful for one or all of these organizations to adopt such a policy to provide guidance to the veterinary colleges and the profession as a whole. In the meantime, however, some things might be helpful.

First, even though disclosure alone does not resolve the conflicts associated with corporate gift-giving, there should be greater transparency regarding the extent of corporate donations. Specifically, veterinary colleges that allow companies to provide freebies to their students—including gifts such as pens, notebooks, and other office supplies; free or low-cost pet foods and medications; free meals; and any other items of any value—should require those companies to disclose the amount they spend each year on those freebies. Similarly, companies that hire veterinary students as campus representatives should be required to disclose the number of student representatives they have hired, along with their salaries and responsibilities, with this information freely available as a matter of public record.

Second, schools should consider limiting the amount of contact corporations have with veterinary students during their training program. A previous study,<sup>12</sup> for instance, found that limiting such contact with internal medicine residents had a measurable influence on the future behavior and attitude of the residents even years after they had completed their training. Presumably, the same would be true for veterinary students.

Third, greater efforts should be made to educate veterinary students throughout their preclinical and clinical training programs about the potential implications of corporate gift-giving. Educating students about school policies on industry interactions should be just one part of this educational program, and workshops based on social science research regarding the influence of corporate gift-giving should also be included. A potential model may be the PharmedOut project developed by the Georgetown University Medical Center,<sup>19</sup> which seeks to document and disseminate information about how pharmaceutical companies influence the prescribing habits of physicians and to help physicians recognize that they may have been vulnerable to such influences.

Finally, students should be encouraged to avoid conflicts of interest associated with corporate freebies. In the human medical profession, No Free Lunch, a nonprofit organization of health-care providers, urges health-care professionals to pledge to accept no money, gifts, or hospitality from the pharmaceutical industry.<sup>20</sup> A similar effort should be started in the veterinary medical profession.

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