“On the Take: How Medicine’s Complicity with Big Business Can Endanger your Health”

Jerome P. Kassirer, 2005, 251 pages, Oxford University Press, $28.00

Review by Norman M. Goldfarb

“On the Take: How Medicine’s Complicity with Big Business Can Endanger your Health” is a thoughtful and wide-ranging discussion of the manifold ways in which pharmaceutical and medical device companies can influence physicians with financial and other inducements. Most physicians will claim that they (but perhaps not others) are immune to such influence, but the companies don’t spend all that time and money for their own amusement. Dr. C. Everett Koop spoke for most physicians when he said, “It is true that there are people in my situation who could not receive a million-dollar grant and stay objective. But I do.”

The author, a physician, medical school professor, and former editor-in-chief of the New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM), is especially insightful about issues related to publications, professional organizations, and academia. The book also covers advertising, disclosures, clinical research, consulting, education, gifts, grants, honorariums, meals and speaking.

A culture of inducement is ingrained in our medical culture. For example, at one FDA advisory committee meeting, nine of the ten physicians who reported on the safety and effectiveness of a drug were paid consultants to the manufacturer. In one study of medical articles, 96% of authors who wrote favorable articles had financial relationships with the manufacturers, while only 67% who wrote neutral articles and 37% who wrote negative articles had such relationships. We can’t expect companies to put their critics on the payroll, but the current reward system is certainly self-reinforcing.

Unfortunately, the author’s proposed remedies are mostly along the lines of “Don’t do that!” One constructive suggestion he makes is to add some specifics to conflict-of-interest disclosure statements and post them in an online database where there might be some accountability. Perhaps the NEJM author who disclosed “having equity interests” in a company of which he was the president and CEO might have been more forthcoming.

The book is available in bookstores.

Reviewer

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