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Study Prompts Calls for More Disclosure on Consulting Fees to Doctors

By DUFF WILSON

Concerns about the influence of health industry money on medical journals and the practice of medicine are being highlighted again with a new study published on Monday in *The Archives of Internal Medicine*.

The study found that 27 of 32 doctors, who each received \$1 million or more from medical device makers in 2007, or their publishers, failed to disclose the financial connection in medical journal articles the next year.

Medical journals set the tone for medicine. As the researchers, led by David J. Rothman, a professor and president of the Institute on Medicine as a Profession at Columbia University, wrote:

These articles constitute a permanent scientific record that is used by practicing physicians, guideline committees, purchasers, and patients to evaluate treatment options. Journal editors, reviewers, and readers must be fully informed about authors' industry relationships to consider the potential for bias.

Consumers, too, we might add. You can look up your doctor or medical professor at the privately owned Web site PharmaShine to see if a company has reported payments. And starting in 2013, all such payments are supposed to be reported on a government Web site under a "sunshine" provision of the health care overhaul.

Professor Rothman argues that journals should request and publish the exact amounts of money that authors have been paid by interested companies. One doctor received \$8,862,500, for instance. Why not publish that amount instead of just saying his fees were more than \$10,000?

As Professor Rothman said, "We've got accurate data out there. Why not use it?"

The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors has improved its recommended disclosure procedures to include a standardized form for major journals, but it does not require specific amounts.

Dr. Marcia Angell, former editor-in-chief of *The New England Journal of Medicine* and a lecturer at Harvard Medical School, would go further – much further.

She argues that these payments, combined with cases of apparent bias in research and review articles, leaning in the sponsor's favor, require significant action.

Dr. Angell wrote in an e-mail to us:

This is an ingenious study, with unsurprising results. It is one more indication of the widespread corruption of the medical profession by industry money. The journals' lax enforcement of disclosure policies probably reflects the fact that journals, too, are dependent on industry support.

But even full disclosure doesn't deal with the underlying problem, since it doesn't eliminate the conflict of interest. In fact, it tends to be regarded as a sort of absolution. The best answer is to prohibit altogether, not just disclose, many of the financial dealings between the profession and industry.

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