

The need for pharma-sponsored medical education

Both doctors and the general public have, in the past, been sceptical about the possible bias of pharma-sponsored medical and disease area information. Many doctors will not attend pharma-sponsored meetings or symposia unless they are interested in hearing new trial data or they can gain points for their ongoing professional development. For generic education regarding a therapy area, they may seek something they consider to be unbiased – like their own professional bodies or the BMJ Learning resources.

Have fears about credibility been valid? Probably yes. But marketing practices that were common a decade or two ago are no longer permitted by regulatory bodies or favoured by pharma companies themselves. The goal is increasingly to fund the best added value educational programmes in the industry to raise profile and maintain good relationships with healthcare professionals. This may involve generating content or supporting third parties, often alongside competitor companies. And this is not only good for the reputation of pharma; it is good for medicine. Companies are often in a unique position to bring together key opinion leaders and fund costly events and programmes that would not be available otherwise.

With patients now being placed at the heart of healthcare, there is, more than ever, a need for high quality information on diseases and their management for the wider public. There is no doubt that some of the best and targeted patient materials out there are provided by pharma companies, and adherence to the ABPI Code ensures that these are also updated on a regular basis. A recent

programme for patients sponsored by Roche in a fairly niche disease area contained materials in 15 languages, including both written and audio versions. This sort of material just could not have been provided by the NHS or patient groups alone.

Increasingly people are turning to the web for answers to their medical questions. But there is little or no regulation of the sites they might find, and the typical “Google” search leads to a first page of links that combine the most popular sites, those with good search engine optimisation and those with paid “click throughs”. Using poor information can lead to lasting misconceptions, inaccurate self-diagnosis, the purchasing of unnecessary drugs and products, and presumably poor outcomes in many cases.

So in one of the least regulated spaces for information provision, there is a huge role for well researched and regulated medical information, and this is where the pharma industry can capitalise. Patient groups are doing an increasingly good job of their websites, professional bodies are getting better at pushing their sites higher up the list and search engines themselves try to help out by ensuring that the most credible information is more likely to appear first. However, the opportunity is there for the industry to provide informational centres of excellence and medical education portals and to become a first point of reference for both healthcare professionals and patients.

Aggregation technologies such as RSS feeds now facilitate good content being delivered through the websites of many other organisations, without any loss of ownership or control. Beyond that, the history and credibility of the web domains of the pharmaceutical companies mean that any educational materials that they host will be more likely to benefit from high page-rankings within the web’s search engines. One of the most reliable ways to differentiate reliable and unreliable online sources remains the identity of the authors and their credibility. Compared to a single patient author talking about personal experience (perhaps

through a blog) and with no referenced claims, a pharma-sponsored website looks much more reliable.

However, the regulatory bodies and industry organisations must play an increasing role in helping to ensure high standards. The current ABPI code of practice contains only a page of guidance on the internet, and offers little advice on anything but the simplest technologies that are available. The pharmaceutical industry urgently needs more complete guidance about the broad range of available communication channels and how to make appropriate use of them.

A BMJ survey of doctors in February 2008 asked the question “Do you object to continuing medical education being funded by the pharmaceutical industry?” 55% of respondents said “yes”; they did object. However, just 5 years ago, the results of a similar survey were much less in favour¹ of industry funded education. This shows that pharma companies have clearly gone some way to allaying fears about the credibility of their information but the message is clear – there is some way to go. These companies must recognise that the onus is on them to demonstrate the validity of pharma-sponsored medical education.

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¹ Are doctors and the drug industry too close for comfort? BMJ Poll, 31 May 2003.
<http://www.bmj.com/polls/docdrug.dtl>