

Utilizing relationships with pharmaceutical companies to maximize benefit to you and your clients

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Abstract

Ethics influence decisions we make every day. As health professionals, our decisions have consequences that can be far-reaching and are under high scrutiny. As entrepreneurs, it is our responsibility to our employees and our family to run a profitable enterprise. It is important to recognize any potential conflict of interest and manage it appropriately. We often are brought information by employees of pharmaceutical companies that have an inherent conflict of interest when they approach us. It is up to us to utilize this data to the best of our abilities to educate our clients. It is also our responsibility to maximize these relationships to maximize profit for our business and the businesses of our clients.

Key words: pharmaceutical companies, relationships

Résumé

L'éthique influence les décisions que l'on prend chaque jour. En tant que professionnels de la santé, nos décisions peuvent avoir des conséquences considérables et être suivies de près. Comme entrepreneurs, nous avons la responsabilité auprès de nos employés et de notre famille de diriger une entreprise rentable. Il est important de reconnaître tous les conflits d'intérêts possibles et de les gérer adéquatement. Nous recevons souvent de l'information provenant d'employés de compagnies pharmaceutiques dans des situations de conflit d'intérêts lorsqu'ils nous approchent. Ils nous incombent d'utiliser cette information au meilleur de nos compétences afin d'informer nos clients. Il est aussi de notre ressort de maximiser les retombées de ces relations au profit de notre entreprise et de nos clients.

Introduction

Relationships drive everything we do in life, and we are going to discuss how to maximize your relationship with pharmaceutical companies. The first point of discussion needs to be, should we have these relationships at all and what format should they take on? I recently was asked to participate on an Ethics Task Force for American Association of Bovine Practitioners (AABP) to look at some of the ethical dilemmas we encounter as food animal veterinarians, as well as look at some of the guidelines that govern them. For the first time, I really stepped back and looked at things we do every day and had an awakening in the difference in opinions

of respected people on how some of these issues should be approached. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics are guiding principles put forth by AVMA to address ethics. This is not a law, but a guideline for us as practicing veterinarians to utilize when making day-to-day decisions. Those that have not read this document should take time to familiarize themselves with the document.

First, it is helpful to define what ethics are. "Ethics have to do with what my feelings tell me is right or wrong"; "Ethics have to do with my religious beliefs"; "Being ethical is doing what the law requires" and "Ethics consist of the standards of behavior our society accepts" are all bullet points you will find trying to define ethics. While none of these give a direct definition, they do give us some idea of the term, while the Webster dictionary defines it as a set of moral principles: a theory or system of moral values. It is generally accepted in the world of psychology that these guidelines we inherently follow are developed at a very early age, but circumstances later in life can influence them as our careers progress.

There are dilemmas of ethics that most, if not all of us, agree are unethical and other dilemmas that we all agree are ethical. While it may be useful to look at these, the real question for me is when we get closer to the middle ground or when you have situations that offer decisions that may be ethical to 1 party and not another. Veterinarians differ from others in the medical field in that most practitioners are still small business owners and have the responsibilities that come with having employees and running a business. There are, in my opinion, ethical obligations to employees to provide a profitable business to maintain pay scales, benefits, a quality workplace, and so on.

An example of a dilemma that may occur is selling products as a practitioner. Should product be sold to non-clients? Prescription product? At what level of profit? Does it matter if the profit comes in the form of mark-up of purchase price or a rebate? What if 1 product is more profitable but not as effective? What if 2 products have equal effectiveness but 1 is more profitable? What about situations where if the veterinarian does not supply the product the producer will not be able to get it in a timely manner? Does it matter that if it is coming from the veterinarian they can better govern it?

One of the issues brought up in some of the scenarios listed is conflict of interest, or even the appearance of what could be a conflict of interest, even if the conflict is managed or not present. We immediately have a conflict of interest on a product or service that we charge for. Do we need to

eliminate these from our practice or manage them internally? What if eliminating them is detrimental to the clients? Is it enough to recognize that this conflict is present and disclose it to the clients?

Our veterinary oath also mentions ethics:

*Being admitted to the profession of veterinary medicine, I solemnly swear to use my 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. I will practice my profession conscientiously, with dignity, and in keeping with the **principles of veterinary medical ethics**. I accept as a lifelong obligation the continual improvement of my professional knowledge and competence.*

Distributor representatives and pharmaceutical representatives will call on you as you begin to work in practice. Some veterinary graduates may choose to work for a pharmaceutical company and be calling on practitioners. These representatives can be a real asset to your practice. Distributor representatives can help you manage programs and will often offer services to help promote your practice, such as develop a website or a brochure to hand out. Likewise, phar-

maceutical representatives can help sponsor meetings, give you promotional money, and other benefits. It is important to remember the information brought to you by these people is biased by default and interpret it accordingly. It need not be dismissed, but interpreted knowing the source and after thorough evaluation of trial design and details of the research.

Most companies have marketing programs that will need to be managed and utilized if you are going to sell product and maximize profit. While I do believe it is a conflict of interest to profit from sales of product it is not unethical, and it is not in the best interest of business to not utilize these programs. When purchase decisions based on participation influence product selection, the slope gets steeper and when a practitioner uses a product they feel is less efficacious to participate, then unethical boundaries have been crossed.

It is up to us to manage these ethical decisions and conflicts of interest on a daily basis, juggling between ethical obligations to clients, patients and employees. While managing those decisions on conflict of interest, it is also our obligation to our business, our employees, our families, and ourselves to run a business that is profitable and as efficient as possible.