Relationships with Industry Are OK If You Follow the Rules

To the Editor—Life is peculiar. Good things and bad things can happen at the same time. Since people don’t always clearly see what goes on around them, I’m reporting an extraordinary coincidence from a university I visited.

Upon arrival, I found the anesthesia department discussing one topic, the empty desk of a clerk bookkeeper. I listened. Her suspension without pay had occurred after someone discovered that she was receiving gifts. She had ordered all of the office supplies for the department—pens, paper, calendars, software, or whatever people needed. She apparently did a good job; people always had what they needed. She relied primarily on one supply company, which was a good company, with prompt and courteous sales personnel. This company’s products weren’t the cheapest, but their salespeople were dependable. They made her look good, and she supported them. The supply company offered promotional items, mostly small things, and gave them away whether they were bought or not. So the bookkeeper had selected a toaster for her house and a leather purse. She claimed that one only got points based on what one bought and then traded in free points; she and the company had agreed that there was nothing wrong with this.

But the professionals in the department thought it was wrong. The bookkeeper was spending company money and benefiting personally. Voices whispered that she was single, had been out by herself, seemed to be in search of another job, and now had a real black mark on her record. But what she did was wrong, and she had to be punished. There are rules for employees, and she had broken one.

By lunchtime most everyone had finished discussing this unfortunate situation. The anesthesia department was in a better mood then because a company that manufactures a muscle relaxant was providing tacos for lunch. The company’s sales representative was present to answer any questions, so this was educational. In fact, the representative asked me what I liked best about his drug. He believed in good communication. In 2 weeks he was sponsoring a golf outing and, since residents don’t have much money, he would pay for everything, even the drinks. This outing might cost him $1,000, but it would promote good communication. He also bought pizza for some journal conferences, which clearly were educational. Moreover, his company had given the department $4,000 for a research study of muscle relaxants.

The department had very fair rules because the other companies that manufacture muscle relaxants also got to sponsor lunches, journal clubs, and outings. My host explained that anesthesiologists are professionals and that company logos on pens, clipboards, and sweatshirts and other promotions don’t affect their judgment. The anesthesia department spends well over a half million dollars a year buying these muscle relaxants, so it should expect good service. Anyway, it’s very fair: the department supports the company, and the company supports the anesthesiologists. These rules are good for physician morale and help everyone provide good service to patients. The sales representatives know this. They appreciate anesthesiologists so much that they’re about our best friends.

It’s too bad about the bookkeeper. She should have understood the rules; they’re the same everywhere.

Robert E. Johnstone, M.D.
Professor
Department of Anesthesiology
West Virginia University
Morgantown, West Virginia 26506

(Accepted for publication July 29, 1993.)