Leading articles


The relationship between the Journal and the pharmaceutical industry

Last year, the Royal College of Physicians published a report (Report, 1986) entitled, 'The Relationship between Physicians and the Pharmaceutical Industry'. This began with a statement of the benefits of a 'close and constructive relationship between the medical profession...and the pharmaceutical industry' in furthering the well-informed and safe use of drugs and encouraging necessary cooperative research. It then stated the need for strictly professional conduct in this relationship and the public concern about possible abuses where financial interests were concerned; reviewed the evidence presented to the College working party; and finally made recommendations for future behaviour. The Journal of Antimicrobial Chemotherapy enjoys an important role in furthering this relationship between clinicians and the industry, within the field of scientific research into antimicrobial agents, and it is right that the Journal should consider its position and its practices in the light of the Report's comments about publishing and related matters.

An obvious point must be stated first: that scientific workers within the pharmaceutical industry are among the most productive and respected contributors of original articles and other papers to the Journal. Articles for the Journal's issues undergo peer review and careful editorial consideration and there can be no doubt of the impartiality with which these scientific contributions are processed.

Recently, we have introduced into our Advice to Contributors section in the Journal the instruction that sources of financial support should be included in the Acknowledgements section and that approval by an ethical committee of work on human
subjects should be stated. The Editors and their advisors consider carefully the ethical issues in human and animal experimentation and papers are not published if they describe work that would be unacceptable in these respects in Britain. While the Journal is not responsible for the content of advertisements, all are scrutinized for excessive or unsupported claims by the Editor-in-Chief. Space has recently been donated to the Advertising Standards Authority.

The activity at which criticism has been pointed in the past, and about which there could quite justifiably be anxiety for the Journal's integrity, is the publishing of supplements on antimicrobial agents under development that are sponsored by the manufacturers. The Editors are aware of the potential abuses; the subject has been reviewed in the Journal previously (Phillips, 1983) but now is a suitable time to reconsider the topic in some detail.

The Royal College of Physicians' report quoted, with approbation, the rules applied by the British Journal of Pharmacology. In comparison with these, as printed, our system is even more stringent.

When the Editor-in-Chief is approached by a company with a proposal for a supplement, the first consideration is whether the likely assembly of papers will make a valuable and interesting compilation for our readers. Although occasionally already-assembled material is reviewed, usually the editors of the supplement are involved in the planning of a symposium programme to yield manuscripts. Often material not directly related to the company's product is included and fundamental issues in chemotherapy are discussed to give a setting for the papers on the individual drug. The editors deal directly with the authors, usually attending the meeting to assess and edit papers on the spot, with the advantage of liaison with the authors and a moderating of the papers with reference to the discussion held at the meeting itself.

All the editors of a supplement are appointed by the Editor-in-Chief, and they are chosen as having the range of expertise necessary to referee all the contributions. For supplements on new agents, more preliminary work than would be accepted for standard Journal issues, particularly in clinical trials, may be included, but it is rare for all submissions to be accepted; sometimes many papers are rejected on grounds of triviality or scientific unacceptability. Others undergo a lengthy process of revision. It may become apparent at the time that insufficient acceptable material is available to provide a useful and balanced view of the subject and the supplement is abandoned.

The cooperation of the pharmaceutical company in facilitating the editing process and at the stage of proof reading is most valuable, particularly in the detection of inaccuracies in scientific statements and structural formulæ. Attempts to apply pressure for changes in content or wording so as to favour the product are rare and are firmly resisted; it is clear that a biased publication benefits nobody. The Editor-in-Chief is the final arbiter of the inclusion of contributions and their content and expression. Papers originating in a supplement are clearly indicated as such, both in the original issue and in offprints, and have to be so cited in references. The Correspondence section of the Journal is open for discussion of any of the material appearing in the supplements or in the regular Journal issues.

Our aim is to supply to our readers and to the sponsoring company a scientifically sound compendium of information about a new compound at an early stage in its development. We are grateful to the pharmaceutical industry for making this possible, as well as for the income, which supports, among other things, the Society-sponsored supplements on other topics in chemotherapy that are not focused on particular antimicrobial agents: in 1986, supplements on The Carrier State, Drug Resistance in Viruses and the Evolution, Epidemiology and Ecology of Antibiotic Resistance; and forthcoming in 1987 a supplement on Infective Endocarditis. We recognize the intrinsic dangers of sponsorship, and work to minimize these—for example, by ruling out, for the future, direct payments by sponsors to editors for their services. We believe that these supplements are a useful part of the Journal's role in furthering the beneficial and productive relationship that the Royal College of Physicians' report described.

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References