The Role of Sponsored Supplements in a Peer-Reviewed Journal: A Reply to an Editorial

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This letter is in response to the well-written discussion by Dr Foad Nahai1 entitled “The Role of Sponsored Supplements in a Peer-Reviewed Journal” in Aesthetic Surgery Journal (ASJ). It is clearly evident that Dr Nahai has considered this subject in detail both from an ethical as well as an informational standpoint to create an editorial that offers an in-depth analysis of sponsored supplements.

Dr Nahai’s discussion of the overall indication for and benefit of sponsored supplements is quite good. I doubt that any of us disagree that focused supplements have significant clinical value, particularly when a subject or product is relatively new—such as with acellular dermal matrix (ADM), nonsurgical facial rejuvenation, or Dysport (Medicis, Inc, Scottsdale, Arizona) dosing, all of which have been topics of recent supplements in ASJ. These publications have the potential to be quite successful in bringing to the reader an overview of each subject in a relatively unbiased manner, even when sponsored by one of the companies in the field.

Dr Nahai explains in great detail the Editorial Board’s involvement in the supplements and the extensive peer review that is given to each article. It was reassuring and certainly not unexpected to learn the extent to which each manuscript is examined by the Editorial Board. It was reassuring to know that the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors has published a list of uniform requirements for supplements, which is an excellent guide in this area of concern.

However, with regard to the recent supplement entitled “Acellular Dermal Matrix: Fundamentals and Expanding Applications of Plastic Surgery,”2 a number of aspects fall short of the overall plan that Dr Nahai and the Editorial Board have for sponsored supplements. Dr Nahai is concerned that these industry-funded projects may “give a false impression of partiality or endorsement on the Journal’s part.”3 Although it is certainly true that the sponsorship of this supplement by LifeCell (Branchburg, New Jersey) was disclosed on the cover, it was disappointing to find that 9 of the 12 articles in this supplement were written by doctors who disclosed a financial arrangement with LifeCell, which manufactures one of the products discussed therein.

The field of ADM now has approximately 8 to 10 entrants from various companies, with which most of us are familiar. It was unfortunate that so many of the articles were written by LifeCell supporters with little or no mention of other products. Dr Nahai states that “information was included about many other acellular dermal matrix products currently on the market.” However, none of these articles were written specifically about any other product other than products of LifeCell. This is akin to having a supplement on soft drinks and having 9 of the 12 articles written by Pepsi-Cola employees.

Dr Nahai also discusses disclosure in detail. We do not doubt his sincerity on this subject, but should disclosure extend to the degree to which a doctor is obliged to a company? We realize that this is a complicated topic that has been previously discussed in the literature. It seems to us that the amount someone is being paid does have bearing on how much of an advocate he or she is for that product. To that end, “full and accurate disclosure” was not achieved in the ADM supplement and, indeed, could be improved.

Dr Nahai mentions that there is always a guest editor, but unfortunately, this information was not included in the supplement. In his editorial, he does state that Dr Joseph Serletti was the guest editor; unfortunately, there was a “publishing error,” and his name was not printed on the cover.

In summary, there is clearly good that can be achieved by printing sponsored supplements in a peer-reviewed journal. Our Editorial Board is capable of determining topics that are appropriate for the supplements. When a subject is chosen, it would be appropriate that multiple products be represented by various authors, even if the supplement is sponsored by a particular company; otherwise, this can be misconstrued as an advertisement. Although Dr Nahai pointed out that the Editorial Board has complete control over the content of the supplement, it appears that in this situation, not enough planning was

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done prior to soliciting papers to allow for various product representation. The result was a supplement heavily weighted toward one company, with very little representation of any of the other products. This is a drawback to this particular supplement and one that could have been avoided.

Finally, it is disturbing to read that “the authors themselves may work directly with the sponsor . . . as they compose the articles.” It is our opinion that most of the plastic surgeons in the United States would prefer to see less of this “coziness” with industry manufacturers, not more. There appears to be an increasing commercialization of plastic surgeons as the years go by. Remarkably, this is condoned by our leaders, and these close relationships will only increase as long as plastic surgery leadership agrees to go along with it.

We do appreciate the effort of Dr Nahai and the Editorial Board and enjoyed reading the editorial.

**Disclosures**

Dr Elliott has nothing to disclose. Dr Toth is a paid consultant for the Mentor Worldwide LLC (Santa Barbara, CA), which manufactures acellular dermal matrix products.

**REFERENCES**