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Seducing the Medical Profession

New evidence keeps emerging that the medical profession has sold its soul in exchange for what can only be described as bribes from the manufacturers of drugs and medical devices. It is long past time for leading medical institutions and professional societies to adopt stronger ground rules to control the noxious influence of industry money on what doctors prescribe for their patients.

Last week two new cases came to light that reveal the lengths to which companies will go to buy influence with doctors, pharmacists and other medical professionals. Reed Abelson reported in *The Times* on Jan. 24 about a whistle-blower's lawsuit alleging that Medtronic had paid tens of millions of dollars in recent years to surgeons in a position to use and recommend its medical devices. In one particularly egregious example, a prominent Wisconsin surgeon received \$400,000 for just eight days of consulting.

In last Saturday's *Times*, Gardiner Harris and Robert Pear revealed that a Danish company paid a pharmacist, doctors' assistants and a drug store chain to switch diabetic patients to the company's high-priced insulin products.

In the wake of past reports of industry's influence over prescribing practices, medical and industry groups have issued guidelines defining appropriate behavior. But as an article in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* made clear last week, these guidelines are far too weak.

The influential authors called for a complete ban on all gifts, free meals and payments for attending meetings. They urged doctors to reject free drug samples because they are a powerful incentive to use medicines that are expensive but not more effective. And they called for a ban on consulting arrangements that entail no specific scientific duties.

These proposals are hardly onerous. Kaiser Permanente, a California-based managed care group, has adopted nearly all of the recommendations. Its doctors prescribe heavily marketed medicines far less frequently than most other doctors.

The critical issue is that doctors must have the best interests of their patients at heart in prescribing drugs or recommending medical devices. Their judgment must not be clouded by financial self-interest or the desire to please industrial benefactors.