

Not For Sale

It was only 10 a.m., but the heat and humidity on this central Florida morning belied the fact that the calendar said autumn. As beads of perspiration formed and clothing began feeling sticky and burdensome, I longed for either air conditioning or a swimming pool. On the front lawn of the Orange County Convention Center there was neither. But there was a tent, a mobile dental unit, a few dozen boisterous local schoolchildren, and a group of busy but smiling volunteers from Colgate orchestrating the proceedings. The real perspiration belonged to them.

Inside the mobile dental unit, children were being screened for dental needs and given a bag containing a toothbrush and other hygiene items. The children were then guided to the tent, where they visited several educational stations: a volunteer demonstrating brushing on a giant foam molar, dental coloring books, and an educational video. This was the manifestation of a partnership between Colgate-Palmolive Company and the American Dental Association called Save the World From Cavities, which members may be aware of now.

This is one example of a growing list of partnerships between the ADA and the dental industry. Clay Mickel, associate executive director, corporate relations and communications at the ADA, has outlined other recent corporate sponsorship programs taking place on the national level. Among these are Give Kids a Smile with partners Crest, Sullivan-Schein, DEXIS and Ivoclar Vivadent Inc.; a diabetes and gum disease campaign with partner Colgate; and an oral cancer awareness campaign with partner CDx Laboratories.

Closer to home, an article in the Sept. 16,

2004, *CDA Update* discussed how corporate sponsors Procter & Gamble, Oral-B, and Sky Financial Solutions work with CDA to strengthen our dental community here in California. We are also used to seeing corporate sponsorship of speakers at both ADA Annual Sessions and CDA Scientific Sessions. And why not? After all, the dental industry provides valuable resources including funding, equipment, and personnel to these and other worthwhile services being provided to both the public and members of the dental profession. So with these very positive activities in mind, let's examine the growing relationship between the profession of dentistry and the dental industry. Is there cause for concern?

It seems that many dentists have a mixture of acceptance and suspicion of corporate involvement in our profession's pursuits. Most realize there are clearly instances where corporate partnerships with the dental profession are successful and benefit all involved. There are others where potential pitfalls exist. Perhaps our members' suspicion is due to a keen awareness that there is danger in becoming too cozy with the for-profit world. Three examples illustrate this danger and demonstrate some undesirable outcomes when a profession, grounded in scientific knowledge and integrity of action, takes the wrong direction in its relationships with industry. The first example occurred not in dentistry, but in medicine. Several years ago, the American Medical Association garnered substantial criticism from, among others, its own members as a result of a controversy surrounding its seal program, when money was apparently exchanged between a company seeking seal approval for a product and the AMA. While



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the AMA insisted the eventual awarding of the seal was in no way connected to the money exchanged, the damage was done. With accusations that the AMA seal was “for sale,” the AMA and its seal program lost credibility; and it is likely that membership numbers were negatively affected as a result.

The second example occurred within the dental profession several years ago, when Coca-Cola inked a deal with the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry to fund caries research. This poorly thought-out partnership could have potentially led to research tainted by a for-profit interest and/or mistakenly drawn conclusions by the practicing community had not the organization halted this relationship. This corrective action may also have been taken too late to avoid a loss of some credibility of the organization.

The third example, unfortunately, lies within the domain of dental journalism. There have been a growing number of respected clinicians and researchers who are vocal in their disapproval over the direction some of our scientific journals are taking. The source of their consternation lies in the publication of research that is funded by a for-profit entity, particularly when the subject of the published study is a product manufactured by the funding entity. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for one or more of the investigators to be directly employed by the company or receive compensation from them in some form. Some claim that disclosure of funding for the study and any financial ties to the company by the authors is sufficient information to allow the reader draw his or her own conclusion as to the validity of the research. Common sense, however, tells us that there is something very wrong with this arrangement. In spite of disclosure,

there are numerous ways in which the final published article can be biased, for example, by the suppression of results or even of entire studies that may prove unfavorable to the funding entity.

We must not continue to let corporate involvement in the dental profession erode our trustworthiness, our integrity, or our position of respect with the public. It is therefore incumbent upon the various segments within the profession to ensure that this does not happen. It is the responsibility of those in the research and academic community to guarantee the unbiased and untainted pursuit of new information through research never takes a backseat to for-profit interests. Those in the dental industry sector must maintain a transparent approach to business that clearly separates pursuit of profit from outside independent research or altruistic activities. Those in organized dentistry leadership must exercise caution when entering into partnerships with industry so that financial sponsorship of projects that benefit humankind does not jeopardize other valuable programs, such as the seal program. Those involved in our professional scientific journals must set and consistently achieve the highest standards with regard to publication of truly unbiased and independent research so that when a practitioner makes a treatment decision based on a published study, he or she has the assurance that the study is reliable. And finally, the greatest responsibility falls on the individual members of our great profession. We are the watchdogs and must be ever vigilant over every activity and endeavor that relates to dentistry. We must have the courage to speak out and take action when we observe corporate entities cross the line from altruism to self-interest. We must make it clear to all that the profession of dentistry is not for sale. **CDA**