Who's paying?

"There's no such thing as a free lunch". Healthcare professionals would do well to contemplate this well-known adage. For many healthcare professionals, accepting free meals offered by pharmaceutical or medical device companies is trivial and inconsequential. Many do not view accepting such hospitality as compromising their integrity, in the belief that their personal ethics place them above suspicion of being influenced. Yet numerous studies show that healthcare professionals are most definitely influenced by small gifts, like any other human being, and that meals are among the most influential gifts.

For healthcare professionals who are not inclined to question the rather enjoyable habit of eating and drinking at a restaurant or in the workplace without paying, the following simple questions and observations should give pause for thought.

Is it customary to accept a dinner invitation from a new acquaintance? When drug reps are not new acquaintances, do healthcare professionals often reciprocate by inviting the drug rep out to dinner, as one would a friend?

If they don't, maybe it is because they consider they need not reciprocate with these "friends" and that, subconsciously at least, they feel pharmaceutical companies owe them something… in exchange for the prescriptions they write, the drugs they purchase, or for some other activity related to their profession.

Some healthcare professionals might argue that the sums involved are often minor, and that they only have time to inform themselves about health products during a lunch break or an evening event. In which case the meal paid for by the company is a straightforward pragmatic arrangement.

These healthcare professionals would be well-advised to familiarise themselves with the scientific data (see pp. 246-251) showing that the act of eating greatly influences the way in which people perceive and remember messages received at that time. This means that even very simple meals are one of the most effective means of persuasion or sales techniques.

"There's no such thing as a free lunch": in reality, the meals that companies offer to healthcare professionals are ultimately paid for by patients and by those who pay into health insurance systems. Is this expenditure really in the best interests of patients and society?

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