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Short Communication

Do academic institutions need more than verbal disclosures to control and resolve conflict of interest in continuing education?

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ABSTRACT

Conflict of interest is in its essence, conflict of faithfulness and disloyalty to human relationship. Circumstances create a conflict of interest, when an individual has an opportunity to affect continuing medical education content about products or services of a commercial interest with which he/she has a financial relationship. Academic institutions hold a huge responsibility in role modelling and must place a higher priority in following and complying to the conflict of interest policies for the well-being of the public than on individuals' personal or proprietary interest. The purpose of this account is to bring into discussion the ways other than verbal disclosure to manage conflict of interest in continuing education by academia.

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INTRODUCTION

Competition for credits and licensing requirements in many countries has increased the potential for conflict of interest (COI) in continuing medical and nursing education [1]. Conflict of interest in continuing medical or nursing education (CME/CNE) refers to circumstances in which the speaker (who may be a nurse, physician, teacher or a researcher) judgment and learning outcomes for an educational activity are influenced by kinds of relationship with the commercial interest [2,3]. These relationships are usually focused on financial gains, as money is easier to control and it is useful for other purposes [3]. Financial relationships are remunerations that benefit the speaker by receiving a salary, royalty, intellectual property rights, consulting fee, honoraria, ownership

interest (e.g., stocks, stock options or other ownership interest). There are other inducements such as promotion, employment, management position, independent contractor (including contracted research), consulting, speaking and teaching, membership on advisory committees or review panels, and board membership [4].

Circumstances build a conflict of interest (COI), when the speaker/author or an expert has an opportunity to affect educational content about products or services of a commercial interest with which he/she has a financial relationship. The idea behind conflict of interest theme is, conflict of faithfulness and disloyalty of the human relationship [2]. Though the central underpinning or the

essence of the health education and practice is 'Altruism'- the selfless concern of the teacher towards the well-being of the learner and the patient [4]. Ethicists also demand an obligation of fidelity of the physician, nurse, researcher or teacher to the beneficiary [2].

Although academic institutions who are the main providers strictly adhere to disclosure policies [5], are contrary to profitable speakers' bureaus that are usually designed to influence the prescriber community, must place a higher priority on the health and well-being of the public than on individuals' personal or proprietary interests. Speakers in continuing educational (CE) activity have personal economic interests derived from financial relationships with commercial interests that create a personal sense of duty or loyalty to the commercial interest. On the contrary, these financial relationships with commercial interests are important enough to conflict with the person's responsibility to the learners and to conflict with the public interest. Therefore, if a speaker in educational activity has a conflict of interest, the academic institution mandates to control the conflict in a manner that is in the best interest of learners and community.

SPEAKER DISCLOSURE

Speaker verbal disclosure to the audience may only increase level of anxiety and exacerbates the indirect consequences like building mistrust and effects on confidence in the health profession. Learners may not know how to interpret the information provided and may not have any reasonable options to control [3]. For that reason academic institutions enforcement deserve consideration for the regulation of kinds of conflict of interest. Academic institution must require written, signed disclosure of relevant financial benefits or relationships with commercial interests from potential speakers or those having a stake, in a position, to control the content and maintaining the independence of a continuing educational activity. This disclosure form provides the speaker with multiple options to choose and mark the nature of relationship he or his family is involved with, such as financial relationships (like royalty, salary, honoraria, share in stocks, consulting fee, intellectual property rights, contracted research) academic or management position; membership fee for licensure or board examination; or other expected financial remuneration. This rigorous exercise of disclosing conflict of interest to commercial entity is not in any way to prevent an individual with relationships with or interests in commercial entities, or from participating in an educational activity, but to help promote providers in identifying, evaluating and resolving any kind of personal biases in order to inform learners that such relationship exists. The presenters or

all those having a stake in the CE may be disqualified from their role as a teacher, speaker, planner, moderator or an author of the educational activity and will lose the control of or the responsibility for the development, management, presentation, improvement or evaluation of the continuing educational activity[4].

IDENTIFYING, CONTROLLING AND RESOLVING CONFLICTS OF INTEREST IN CONTINUING EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITY BY THE ACADEMIC INSTITUTION

The academic institutions curtail the trouble of COI through disclosure policies as are different from the professional associations and lucrative speakers' bureaus employ different methods that go beyond simple disclosures to resolve conflict of interest prior to the educational activity being delivered to learners [5].

1. In order to control potential COI in a continuing educational activity, the academic institution (provider) must be well aware about relevant relationships prior to the activity being developed and delivered to the learners. The academic institutions must obtain from the speakers or authors written disclosures. This disclosure information is vital in the whole process. Individuals who refuse to disclose a kind of / financial relationships are disqualified from having a CE role, that will otherwise give them the opportunity to affect the development, management, presentation or evaluation of that CME/CNE activity [1]. A conflict of interest is situation-based, and not on the character or actions of the individual. "A conflict of interest occurs when there is a disagreement between an individual's personal interests and his or her professional obligations to the academic institution. When a person has dissociated himself of a financial relationship to commercial interest and if the period is more than twelve months, any related conflict of interest will automatically be resolved. However, this relationship must be disclosed to the learners for the next 12 months, as part of demonstrating compliance [6].
2. An analysis of the information provided by the speaker with a clear understanding of the planned CE content enables and supports the provider to identify any potential conflicts of interest. 'Circumstances create COI'. However, there are two components in continuing education to conflict of interest – a current relationship with a commercial interest, and the opportunity to affect

content relevant to products or services of that commercial interest. If the relationship is current and has been identified, controlling or determining the COI must involve the following approaches that can be used to resolve conflict of interest.

The following approaches can be used to resolve conflict of interest before the activity is translated to the learners. The educational planning process involves specifying the roles, “*Who does what?*” within a continuing education activity. The conflict management is decided by a committee within an institution that may include commercially disinterested panel of faculty and staff.

- a) The provider should regulate the speaker with the conflict of interest to limit the presentation to areas of disinterest i.e. pathophysiology, and by asking someone else, without a COI, to take forward and discuss the clinical implications of the primary speaker’s discovery and research.
- b) The provider (academic institution) must ensure that disclosures be made in program printed materials and also to be projected in the second slide of the PowerPoint presentation[4].
- c) The provider (academic institution) should change the focus of the activity for speakers identified with a conflict of interest to content, so that the content is not about products or services of the commercial interest that are the basis of the conflict of interest.
- d) When a speaker has been the principal investigator on an industry funded project, he must be controlled by the provider to limit the presentation to the data and results of the research. Thereafter someone else

could be assigned to address the broader implications and recommendations for clinical care.

The problems of conflict of interest in continuing education are inflating day by day. The issues if counted and considered are mostly linked to educational events that are regularly organized by professional bodies or associations to provide discount advices to the prescribing physicians [5]. Therefore, academic institutions hold a huge responsibility in role modeling and must place a higher priority in following and complying to the conflict of interest policies, so can safe their shoulders from getting blamed as ‘fishing in the same pool’.

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