**MJA EC members’ views on drug-company sponsored meetings; April 2014**

Jane Symons

I believe we are doing the members a disservice if we automatically reject approaches from PR or pharma to host meetings.

Clear guidelines and complete transparency will ensure the reputation of the Association is protected and the protocol drawn up by an earlier committee addresses most of the concerns which might be raised.

However we should begin by updating this — in consultation with members.

These conditions should be non-negotiable:

* The event must be of genuine news interest.
* It must be an educational meeting — and conform to the ABPI Code which prohibits, amongst other things, promotion of a specific drug or therapy.
* The MJA retains the right to veto any speaker or presentation.
* The MJA retains the right — and will — invite expert speakers to present a range of views on the subject.
* A suitably qualified MJA member chairs the meeting.
* All materials make it clear that the meeting is sponsored by X and the MJA's involvement is not an endorsement of any of claims made.

We should form a sub-committee to review all approaches and this should include at least one member who has expressed reservations about this sort of activity to ensure forensic scrutiny of all proposals. Details of any sponsorship should be posted on the members’ area of the website to ensure complete transparency and I would suggest a cap on the level of sponsorship of say £5,000 (plus all costs). This is enough to make it worthwhile to the MJA , but not so high that we could be accused of selling out. Any income from events should be earmarked for grants for further training or investigative journalism.

Jane Feinmann

I have assumed that the £5,000 offered was to cover the cost of the meeting. This seems perfectly legitimate and fears about *New Scientist* investigating us and finding us to be corrupt and evil are entirely groundless. Certainly ABSW is seen as whiter than white – and we should take it for granted that that is how others see us. However, I wouldn't want the money to be used for anything other than the meeting as I guess it could then be seen as a bribe. So if the costs are less than £5,000, then I would suggest we ask for less.

Joy Ogden

I feel very strongly that we should resist approaches by Pharma to host meetings because we are perceived to be forfeiting our independence, whether we think that is the case or not. I think that however much we insist on ‘clear guidelines and complete transparency’ it will be viewed with suspicion by the world. In my view, whatever the level of Pharma’s sponsorship it is too high a price to pay in terms of the possible damage to our reputation as an independent organisation and I think it could ultimately deter potential MJA members rather than encourage them to join.

Philippa Pigache

I am against meetings suggested and sponsored by a single commercial company (or its PR) in all but the most exceptional circumstances. Even allowing for the MJA having provisos and protocols in place with the utmost transparency, there will still be members of the science journalism fraternity who will think we have ‘sold out’. (Witness the castigation of the ‘Guild on the ABSW google-group for taking money from Danone to enable everyone present to have a free vitamin D test at a member-organised Vitamin D deficiency meeting last February.) In addition, I think it invidious to take sponsorship from a single company when many may be engaged in the same therapeutic compound race, and I think meetings with a broad spectrum – Rising mortality from liver disease (all of them), rather than the latest advances in Hep C treatments – are preferable, and enable the meeting to cover more angles and points of view. Sponsorship money can certainly be put to good causes, but that is what we are already doing with the no-strings money raised by our awards.

Ingrid Torjesen

I spoke against holding the hep c meeting and voted accordingly. My reasons were as follows’My belief was that the MJA only held meetings based around ideas generated by the committee and suggestions from members. Sometimes we then try to find sponsors for the meeting to avoid charging members for attendance. However, the sponsors have no input whatsoever into the content of the meetings or on who is speaking. However, during the debate I learned that the MJA has previously held meetings where that was not the case. Following these some guidelines had been produced. I still voted against because the last one of those meetings was some time ago and I do not think that most MJA members believe we hold meeting suggested by sponsors. I think we need a wider debate on what the MJA is comfortable doing before considering such meetings. If the decision was to hold meeting with more sponsor involvement, I would want to be very clear about how that interaction would take place and be managed. Would we work with just charities, other organisations, PR companies and/or pharmaceutical companies? Would the way we work and what we allowed differ according to the type of sponsor and the theme of the meeting?  Would more than one sponsor per meeting be required? Following this the existing guidelines would need to be revisited and updated to ensure that our behaviour was consistent, clear and transparent.

Caroline White

I take the view that we should be open to all suggestions and ideas from whatever the source, and that we need to be a bit more grown up about big pharma. These companies may have an agenda, but, so too, do government departments and charities.

I also think it is very important that we are transparent about the funding of all our activities, not just events.  We should update our policy and make it more prominent on the website. This will be helpful not only to existing and future members, but also to potential sponsors.

I think we should be rather less afraid of science journalists who think we may have ‘sold out’ and be bold about what we choose to do, provided that we have clear accountable criteria for whatever that is.

Lastly, I don’t think single clinical issues represent big enough draws for our members. But hep C could be part of a wider event on blood-borne/viral/liver diseases.