



**M**edical meetings at the beginning of the century, wrote Cronin in *The Citadel* were splendidly organised, offering sporting and social enjoyments to doctors and their families, reduced terms at hotels, free trips to any ruined abbey in the neighbourhood,

souvenir diaries, generous samples of biscuits, theatre tickets, and even advice on how to fill an empty surgery.

Since those days the pharmaceutical companies have become even more generous especially in North America. Each year they spend some \$3-5 billion on promotion and advertising—successfully, it would seem, judging by the price of their shares. From rugs and diaries they have moved on to education: sponsoring speakers and guest lecturers for whom nobody else seems disposed to pay, and their advertisements fatten prestigious medical journals and keep alive others that might easily have died in utero.

They charge much for their new products but say it costs \$230 million to bring a new drug on the market, in part because they have to fight the bureaucrats at every step of the way. Yet many observers think that the influence of the drug detail men (salesmen) has become too pervasive for comfort.

Lately the issue has caught the attention of several legislators concerned about unethical conduct *in others*. The field was ripe for the ethicists to jump in, also for the medical associations, who were moved to promulgate new codes of behaviour. It was improper, they held, to accept cash phone consulting fees, gifts with strings attached, compensation for being away from work, money for personal expenses, travel, or accommodation. Pens were fine, though not 18 carat ones, and so were notepads, rulers, and flashlights. Also permitted were gifts of educational value, books, grants for lectures, modest meals, and grants for sending trainees to meetings. Purists found even these criteria too lax, realists noted that books may cost as much as \$400 and that modesty in meals lay in the eye of the beholder.

Most recently the Food and Drug Administration also joined in the fray. Charged with overseeing the promotion and advertising of drugs, it frowns on merchandising done

under the guise of education. Accordingly it issued preliminary guidelines for educational activities, including independence from the companies financing the event and objectivity in scientific presentations. At one point there was also talk of detail men not being allowed to hand out their brochures at such functions. Different rules would apply to promotional activities including a prohibition on mentioning unapproved indications for drugs. Reaction ranged from outrage about interference with free speech to concerns that a blackout on new uses for old drugs, notably in oncology, would harm patients, and also that the drug companies might cut back on their support for education. A compromise now being hammered out would delegate oversight to a medical accreditation council already charged with regulating continuing education. But considering the pharmaceutical industry's enormous influence on doctors' prescribing habits there remains the point of view that neither doctors nor institutions should have to depend on the money of drug companies, nor for that matter the medical journals that carry their advertisements—surely a difficult prescription to follow in the real world.—**FORREST DUNN**, attending physician, Cook County Hospital, Chicago, USA.