

UCSD's medical school earns B on ethics report

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2:00 a.m. June 17, 2009

UCSD received a B on a new national score card measuring how well medical schools insulate their students, faculty and doctors from the money, free product samples and other gifts offered by drug and medical-device companies.

Three other medical schools in California — the University of California San Francisco, UC Davis and UCLA — were among the nine nationwide that received A's because they have the most stringent standards.

The rankings were jointly released yesterday by the American Medical Student Association of Reston, Va., and the Pew Prescription Project of Boston, a branch of the Pew Charitable Trusts. The association collected conflict-of-interest policies from the nation's 149 medical schools, and Pew analyzed them in a process that concealed the names of the colleges.

Relationships between health providers and pharmaceutical and medical-device companies have come under increasing scrutiny in recent years as more people question whether paid speaking engagements, free ghost-writing services, complimentary meals, free trips and branded trinkets — such as pens and notepads — negatively influence the way physicians treat patients.

A 2008 report said the pharmaceutical industry spent about \$57.5 billion on marketing in 2004, the latest year for such data, with most of that money paid for outreach to doctors.

“As a future physician, I don't want to be influenced by anything beyond the facts,” said Carissa Chu, a pre-med undergraduate at the University of California San Diego. “There is a line that should be drawn that protects the integrity of (medical schools) from market-based influences.”

The federal government and some states have adopted or considered stiffer standards; California hasn't passed such legislation. Health professionals have beefed up their codes of ethics, while drug companies — fearful of more regulations — have adopted their own set of voluntary restrictions.

Yesterday's score card surprised Kathleen Naughton, director of compliance for UCSD Health Sciences, which includes the medical school.

"I'm a little bit disappointed," Naughton said. "I proudly state that our policies are consistent with the other University of California medical centers, and I think we're doing a great job."

Pew's examination of conflict-of-interest policies at the five UC medical schools identified some differences.

In one example, the UCSD policy prohibits vendors from giving students and staff members gifts or meals on campus. The other three schools go a step further by banning such practices off-campus as well.

The UCSD rules leave the door open for students and workers to accept branded tote bags and other items handed out at conferences. The exception "undermines the attempt to remove the influence of giving," the Pew researchers wrote.

Naughton said items from off-campus events aren't allowed inside the university, and she questioned the ability of the other schools to police such gifting.

In another example of varying expectations, policies submitted by UC Davis, UCLA and UC San Francisco provide oversight mechanisms for ensuring the rules are followed, according to the score card. The UCSD document does not.

Despite the report's conclusions, the effect of the policy in place at UCSD has been substantial, said medical school spokeswoman Jackie Carr.

"Before, people would have calendars or pens on their desks with pharmaceutical names or advertising," Carr said. "All of that has been completely wiped out."

UCSD administrators have used faculty meetings to spread the word about the rules, which took effect in July, Naughton said. Articles outlining the changes have been featured in staff newsletters. New employees receive a briefing about the policy as part of their orientation.

The medical school even sponsored a pen exchange day, when staffers swapped piles of health-company-branded desk items for ones emblazoned with UCSD's name and logo.

Overall, the nation's medical schools are doing a better job of policing industry gifts and payments than in previous years, the score card found.

Forty-five schools, or 30 percent, received an A or B. That was up from 29 schools, or nearly 20 percent, last year.

The score card's authors gave C's and D's to 35 schools, and they flunked 35 others for not submitting information or having significantly lax policies. No grades were given to 34 campuses that were in the process of adopting ethics rules.

Schools that didn't receive top grades on the score card likely will feel pressure to sharpen restrictions so they can boost their chances of achieving a better rating next year, said Arthur Caplan, director of the Center for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania. The medical school garnered the best marks among campuses with A's in the new report.

“This absolutely matters to the deans and the medical school faculties,” Caplan said. “They are sensitive to any suggestion that they are less ethical than their peers.”

While Caplan supports the tightening of ethics policies, he worries that such efforts might create other problems.

“I'm not sure that gives students enough tools to know how to deal with (pharmaceutical and medical-device) businesses when they come out of the academic medical centers. What do you say when they offer you baseball tickets?” he said.

“We're not teaching (students) how to manage the medical industry once they leave school.”

HOW THEY FARED

Of the nation's 149 medical schools, nine — including three in California — received an A from the American Medical Student Association for their conflict-of-interest rules.

Here is how the schools in California fared:

University of California San Francisco — A

UCLA — A

UC Davis — A

UCSD — B

UC Irvine — B

Stanford University — B

Touro College of Osteopathic Medicine — C

Loma Linda University — F (didn't submit a policy)

College of Osteopathic Medicine of the Pacific — F

University of Southern California — B (provisional grade because policy won't take effect until July)

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