

Doctor's orders: Pitt has a model program on drug industry ethics

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Doing the right thing should be its own reward, but that doesn't mean a pat on the back isn't welcome.

The University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine received well-deserved accolades last week when it got an A for its policy regulating interactions between physicians and the pharmaceutical and medical device industry. The American Medical Student Association, in conjunction with the Prescription Project, rated the policies -- or lack of them -- at 150 medical colleges.

The report said the policy for Pitt and the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center is "exemplary" and includes "some of the most ambitious conflicts of interest policies in the country. The policies are written clearly and unambiguously, and in many cases include a short preamble that outlines the reasoning for, and spirit of, each policy."

Pitt and UPMC implemented the rules on Feb. 15, banning gifts including pens, note pads and food from pharmaceutical representatives. The policy also regulates consulting relationships, attendance at off-campus industry-sponsored meetings, and support for scholarships and fellowships. Although physicians still may accept free medication samples, UPMC is working on a central process for taking samples.

The medical school, which had received a B grade last year, was among eight institutions that got A's this time; the only other medical school in the state that won the top grade was at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Nationwide, the majority of schools received failing grades, with just 13 getting B's, three with C's and 18 with D's.

West Virginia University School of Medicine was among those getting a D. Medical colleges at Penn State and Drexel were given incomplete marks after reporting they are developing new policies, and the remaining Pennsylvania schools flunked.

Medical schools that are serious about eliminating questionable practices by their physicians should follow the lesson plan written by Pitt and UPMC.

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