

Senators Probe Medical-Device Companies' Funding for Meeting

By Alex Nussbaum

Oct. 16 (Bloomberg) -- Two U.S. senators asked the organizers of one of the largest medical-device conferences to detail their support from industry leaders including Johnson & Johnson, Medtronic Inc. and Abbott Laboratories.

Senators Charles Grassley, an Iowa Republican, and Herb Kohl, a Wisconsin Democrat, requested the information on the last day of the Transcatheter Cardiovascular Therapeutics conference in Washington, D.C. The annual meeting attracted more than 10,000 physicians as well as top executives from companies making the heart stents, valves and other devices implanted in millions of people.

Gifts and payments to physicians have come under scrutiny as studies have shown such payments can influence decisions about medical treatment and research. Grassley and Kohl have sponsored legislation that would force drug companies and device makers to disclose their spending on doctors. Several drugmakers, led by Eli Lilly & Co., and the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America trade group have issued new disclosure requirements or have restricted gifts to doctors.

“Funding from the medical device industry may influence the practices of nonprofit organizations that purport to be independent in their viewpoints and actions,” the senators wrote in their letter to the Cardiovascular Research Foundation, a New York-based nonprofit that sponsors the conference.

A similar letter was sent to Columbia University, whose medical center employs several of the cardiologists who lead the foundation, including its current chairman, Gregg Stone, and his predecessor, Martin Leon.

Foundation's Response

The foundation issued a statement saying it intended to comply with the request. “CRF is committed to maintaining the highest standards of integrity in all of its research and educational activities and ensuring independence, objectivity and scientific rigor in all of its programs,” the foundation's e-mailed statement said.

The letters asked for details on any financial connections with device makers J&J, Medtronic, Boston Scientific Corp. and Medinol Ltd.

Company payments have an impact, said Richard L. Popp, a Stanford University cardiologist, who spoke today during one of the conference's last sessions. Device makers and drug companies spend \$2 billion annually on events attended by physicians, said Popp, chairman of the conflict of interest board at Stanford, in California.

“They're not spending that money because they like us,” Popp told the audience, citing corporate-sponsored training and education events, honoraria and other spending. “Many of these things are specifically a bribe.”

`Sobering' Discussion

Leon, the former foundation chairman, called the talk “sobering.”

“The issues are with us and we have to both respect and understand and integrate and react appropriately,” he said during a panel discussion.

Eliminating all corporate funding also could have consequences, Stone said during the discussion. Companies provide more than 80 percent of the annual funding for doctor training courses and medical research, and both could suffer if the limits imposed are too strict, he said.

Drug companies spent \$7.2 billion in 2005 on marketing to doctors, including meals, gifts, travel, continuing education and consulting fees, according to the Prescription Project, a Boston-based nonprofit group.

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