

Drugmakers asked to reveal educational grants to doctors

By Steve Sternberg, USA TODAY

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Wondering how much money drug companies spend on continuing education for doctors — and who gets all the support?

Eli Lilly & Co. thinks you deserve to know and lists its grants on its website. Pfizer plans to post similar details soon. Despite Pfizer's move, it is among the 15 companies getting a letter today from Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, asking what they're doing to "meet the public's demand for transparency."

If your company does not have any plans in place, the letter says, "please explain why not."

"Transparency builds both trust and accountability," says Grassley, ranking member of the Senate Finance Committee, which oversees Medicare and Medicaid. "I'm asking other pharmaceutical organizations to follow Lilly's lead and show the public there's nothing to hide."

Allan Coukell of the Prescription Project, a non-profit that has taken aim at conflicts of interest in medicine, says: "Sen. Grassley is a bear on this issue. He has multiple ongoing investigations. He did a big report last year on continuing medical education and the potential for the medical industry to bias (programs) they're funding."

The drug industry is famous for spending vast sums on promotion, an estimated \$30 billion in 2004, according to a study last year in *The New England Journal of Medicine*.

Companies are barred by law, however, from using educational grants — for conferences that doctors must attend to keep pace with scientific advances — to promote their own drugs or devices, experts say. Nevertheless, the finance committee report cited two instances of abuse. To settle those claims of improper drug promotion, Warner-Lambert paid \$430 million in 2004 and Serono labs paid \$704 million in 2005.

Companies can follow the rules and still spend lots of money, judging from an analysis of Lilly's website. In one quarter last year, Lilly spent nearly \$20 million on educational grants, much of it going to conferences for medical specialties that rely on the company's biggest product lines: neuroscience, endocrinology and oncology.

"You give where you earn," says David Rothman of Columbia University, a study author and the Policy Project's associate director.

Alan Breier, Lilly's chief medical officer, says Lilly was not pressured to act by public opinion or Congress and plans to expand the program worldwide. "We started (posting educational grants) last year as part of our transparency agenda, to build trust and confidence (among patients)," he says. "In 2004, we were the first company to voluntarily post our clinical trials and our clinical trials data. We found it was something that patients and doctors appreciated and embraced."

Cathryn Clary, a Pfizer vice president, says her firm is "quite proud of the funding and support we provide" and plans to post this year's first-quarter data soon after the quarter's end.

Clary says Pfizer executives are discussing what to disclose next, adding that the ease of accessing data on the Internet has greatly increased demand. "We're all struggling with how much to reveal," she says. "Stay tuned."