

Harvard Medical Students Rebel Against Pharma-Ties

A front page report in the Business section of the New York Times should bestir some of Harvard Medical School alumni. 200 Harvard Medical School STUDENTS are confronting the administration demanding an end to pharmaceutical industry influence in the classroom.

"The students say they worry that pharmaceutical industry scandals in recent years - including some criminal convictions, billions of dollars in fines, proof of bias in research and publishing and false marketing claims - have cast a bad light on the medical profession. And they criticize Harvard as being less vigilant than other leading medical schools in monitoring potential financial conflicts by faculty members."

Harvard received the lowest grade--an F--from the American Medical Student Association, a national group that rates how well medical schools monitor and control drug industry money. Harvard Medical School's peers received much higher grades, ranging from the A for the University of Pennsylvania, to B's received by Stanford, Columbia and New York University, to the C for Yale.

The revolt began when a first year medical student "grew wary" when a professor promoted cholesterol drugs and "seemed to belittle a student who asked about side effects." He later discovered that the professor, a full-time Harvard Medical faculty member, was a paid consultant to 10 drug companies, including manufacturers of cholesterol drugs.

Another first year student said: "Before coming here, I had no idea how much influence companies had on medical education. And it's something that's purposely meant to be under the table, providing information under the guise of education when that information is also presented for marketing purposes."

The fact is, no one is keeping track of faculty income from industry, or covert marketing pitches infiltrating the classroom: "The school said it was unable to provide annual measures of the money flow to its faculty.." One Harvard professor's disclosure in class listed 47 company affiliations.

On one side of the confrontation: the administration and most of the faculty who admittedly loath to "tighten the spigot" of cash from industry: "school officials see corporate support for their faculty as all the more crucial, as the university endowment has lost 22 percent of its value since last July and the recession has caused philanthropic contributors to retrench."

An outspoken supporter of ties between industry and academia--who served on numerous pharmaceutical advisory boards, Professor Thomas Stossel who is unconcerned about industry influence. He views industry support as "a huge opportunity we ought to mine." A smaller faction of students calls for "continued interaction between medicine and industry at Harvard." They are led by Vijay Yanamadala, 22.

On the other side: students such as Kirsten Austad, 24, a first-year Harvard Medical student who is one of the movement's leaders, who said: **"Harvard needs to live up to its name. We are really being indoctrinated into a field of medicine that is becoming more and more commercialized."**

The students are joined by Dr. Marcia Angell, a faculty member and former editor in chief of the New England Journal of Medicine who has vigorously advocated for an end to liaisons between academia and Big Pharma: "Too many medical schools have struck a 'Faustian bargain' with pharmaceutical companies. If a school like Harvard can't behave itself, who can?"

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