

editorial

More disclosure needed on drug company payouts

By The Denver Post Editorial Board

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When a doctor prescribes medication, we like to think it's in the best interests of the patient and not because the doctor is on a drug company's payroll.

But patients in Colorado and most other states have no way of finding out how much money a drug company has paid a doctor. Some are paid tens of thousands of dollars by drug companies for all sorts of things, from consulting to attending seminars. It certainly raises concerns about whether the money influences their prescribing habits.

U.S. Sen. Charles Grassley of Iowa plans to propose federal legislation requiring drug makers to disclose the payments they make to doctors. He wants the information placed on a federal registry available to the public. It's a proposal whose time is way overdue. Patients should have the opportunity to know about potential conflicts of interest.

Fewer than a handful of states, including Minnesota, have laws requiring registries of such payments and other states are considering them. Colorado has not taken up the issue.

Grassley, the senior Republican on the Senate Finance Committee, said in a speech on the Senate floor last week that while conducting an inquiry into the Food and Drug Administration, he learned that drug companies pay physicians for all sorts of reasons.

"Indeed, some of our leading physicians - doctors who have significant influence in their medical fields - receive tens of thousands of dollars every year from drug companies," Grassley said. "For some, these payments can make up a considerable amount of their annual income."

In addition to honoraria for speaking engagements, funding for research and payments to sit on advisory panels, Grassley noted that drug companies spend about \$1 billion a year to fund educational courses that doctors are required to take. With so much gratuity flowing from the drug companies, we can't help but have concerns.

As an example, Grassley brought up medical researchers at universities, some of whom receive large sums from drug-makers. He cited Dr. Melissa DelBello, who reported on research she was doing on the effectiveness of a powerful drug called Seroquel for treating adolescents with bipolar disorder. The drug is manufactured by Astra Zeneca.

The study, published in 2002, was funded by Astra Zeneca. It showed that Seroquel was a good choice for treating bipolar disorder in children. Over the next two years, Grassley said, disclosure forms showed DelBello was paid \$180,000 for speaking, consulting and other fees to tout the drug. While such gratuities are not necessarily bad, Grassley

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paraphrased Dr. Steven E. Hyman, former director of the National Institute of Mental Health, who said "these payments could encourage psychiatrists to use drugs in ways that endanger patients' physical health."

A study on pharmaceutical payments to physicians published in the Journal of the American Medical Association last March concluded, "Full disclosure would better allow the public to appreciate the relationship between industry and the health profession."

American consumers would be better served by having the transparency and accountability that Grassley's bill would provide.

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