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EDITORIAL: Doctors' orders: Disclosing pay from drug firms would be healthy for doctors' credibility and patients' rights.

Aug. 9--There's a reason why X-rays revolutionized medicine. The more doctors know about the body, the more intelligent their decisions about that body can be. The same principle applies to the practice of medicine, which is why Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, is offering a sensible and timely bill that would make drug firms disclose all their payments to doctors.

Pharmaceutical companies, and some doctors, don't like the idea of making these payments public. (Many other physicians, though, would be thrilled to give their profession an anti-microbial wash.)

Patients are entitled to this information because it can influence their choice of doctors and treatment. Learning which lawmakers and physicians protest public information about drug company payments will be instructive.

Gifts, payments for service and "consultation" fees are pervasive throughout medicine, especially in fields where competition for consumers is fierce. Oncology, with its relatively narrow treatment options, gets fairly little attention from drug reps. Psychiatry, with its huge range of medications and wide doctor discretion, is the medical industry's prom queen.

Some doctors simply refuse all drug company fees or gifts. But others rake in hundreds of thousands of pharma-dollars annually, often for the most dubious services.

A drug company might, for instance, pay a physician richly for her "advice," which really means she sits wordless at a presentation while a new drug is shilled. Or a doctor might be treated to a cruise or a trip to Las Vegas -- ostensibly to learn about a new medication, but really to hear a sales pitch for a new drug and enjoy the drug company's largesse.

Though this practice isn't new, the vigor, innovation and sums applied to it are. They have to be: Competition is intense. Fifty years ago, psychiatrists had only a few blunt pharmaceutical instruments to treat depression. Targeted medications became available in the 1980s and spawned a market with dozens of options that often are interchangeable.

A doctor who has been wined and wooed by a drug rep may be more prone to prescribe the drug his dinner companion recommends. That's human nature. It's also a faster way to learn about a medication than poring over charmless journal articles that might differentiate between side effects, cost or other variables.

Drug companies have protested efforts to require **disclosure**. The payments often go for actual services, or to promote doctors' education, industry spokesmen say. But no drug company measures success with anything so vague as a standardized test.

From a business perspective, an "educated" doctor is one who prescribes that company's product.

Physicians' lives are busy, arduous, often stressful. If they want to hear about new drugs over a nice -- free -- bottle of wine, that's their right. But they should not balk when this continuing education is documented as plainly as the medical degrees on their office walls. If there is nothing wrong with these transactions, there should be nothing to hide.