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Require drug makers

THE REGISTER'S EDITORIALS

Your health may be in your doctor's hands. Your doctor's hands may be in the till of a drug company. So how can you know whether the prescription he or she writes is in your best interest or the best interest of a drug company?

You can't. Not in Iowa. Iowa does not require drug makers to report payments they make to doctors for anything - including consulting and attending seminars.

All Americans, in every state, should have access to information about doctors' financial relationships with drug companies.

It's not just important for individual patients to know about potential conflicts of interest. It's important because health professionals sit on state boards that make decisions about which drugs will be covered by Medicaid, a government health-care program for the poor. Any relationships these individuals have with drug companies need to be public.

Case in point: When the Associated Press recently reviewed records in Minnesota, it found members of a state committee that helps select drugs covered by Medicaid had taken big bucks from drug companies. One doctor on the eight-member committee received more than \$350,000. A pharmacist on the committee collected \$78,000.

Yet Minnesota is among only a few states that require disclosure of payments from drug companies to doctors. Iowa doesn't require this specifically.

Here, the Iowa Medicaid Pharmaceutical and Therapeutics Committee - a nine-member board that makes recommendations to the Iowa Department of Human Services about drugs - is given "informal advice" on conflicts-of-interest law from the state attorney general. Members are told to refrain from voting on any issue that could be construed as a conflict. The state also requires members to list any conflicts on a form and "consider" including potential conflicts like payments from drug companies. In 2005, some members listed owning stock in specific drug companies as a conflict.

Yet those who sit on this board have huge responsibility and power. In Iowa, Medicaid covers more than 300,000 people, and the program spent \$235 million on drugs in fiscal year 2007. Drug companies have a financial interest in getting their drugs on Medicaid's "preferred" drug list - a list of medication Medicaid will pay for unless a doctor gets special approval for different drugs.

A federal law should require drug makers to disclose payments and gifts made to all doctors for everything from consulting to giving lectures to attending seminars. The governor would know about any potential conflicts before appointing members of the Iowa Pharmaceutical and Therapeutics Committee. Then the public would know who may be influencing doctors.

Sen. Charles Grassley, the senior Republican on the Senate Finance Committee, plans to introduce legislation requiring drug companies to disclose any payments made to doctors who submit bills to Medicare and Medicaid. That would include most doctors.

During a recent speech on the Senate floor, Grassley said some of the country's "leading physicians" receive tens of thousands of dollars each year from drug companies. He noted companies spend \$1 billion a year to fund educational courses for doctors.

"For the sake of transparency and accountability, shouldn't the American public know who their doctor is taking money from?" Grassley asked in a speech to the Senate earlier this month.

Yes, the public should know.

It's up to Congress to pass a law that makes it so.