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The money trail leads to questions

Pioneer Press

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The only people who don't have conflicts of interest are the dead. For the rest of us, the challenge is to manage those conflicts with integrity.

Businesses, professional associations and governments address some conflicts explicitly, in black and white terms, especially those having to do with self-dealing. The remedy in those cases is simple: prohibition.

Other potential conflicts - such as those that arise when psychiatrists accept money from companies whose drugs they might recommend - exist in tones of gray. The remedy in such cases is not so simple as prohibition. There may well be good reasons for drug companies to buy services from doctors - such as research, education or other expertise. Given the complexity of health care and the rapid pace of advancements therein, a fast and free flow of information from many sources is important.

However, one piece of the remedy for such potential conflicts is simple: transparency. Or, in other words, giving consumers the ability to follow the money.

Pioneer Press reporter Jeremy Olson has been reporting recently on the updated results of a unique Minnesota law that requires pharmaceutical companies to report gifts, grants and reimbursements to Minnesota doctors. His latest report (on Monday, "Drug makers step up giving to Minnesota psychiatrists"), discussed how much drug companies have paid to psychiatrists and the issues such payments raise. The overriding question: Do such payments induce doctors to favor

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the drug company's interests over those of their patients?

The answer isn't so simple. Not every apparent conflict of interest is as it appears. But the ability to follow the money - to ask the overriding question and get answers - helps in the effort to distinguish between appearance and fact. And in the effort to manage conflicts with integrity.

**Fairness first,
over politics**

The attorney general of the United States, the nation's top prosecutor, is appointed by the president and serves at the president's will and pleasure. Our local prosecutors, called county attorneys in Minnesota, are elected by the voters and frequently come from strong partisan backgrounds.

In both cases, however, we have every right to

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expect that appointed or elected prosecutors apply the law fairly, without regard to political fallout. We never had that confidence in Alberto Gonzales, who announced his resignation as U.S. attorney general on Monday.

Gonzales was a longtime ally of President Bush and followed him from Texas to the White House. Nothing wrong with that. But as White House counsel, he argued that the Geneva Convention's rules on the treatment of prisoners of war do not apply to al-Qaida and the Taliban because "the war against terrorism is a new kind of war." When the horrors of the American-run Abu Ghraib prison came to light in 2004, it was hard not to associate Gonzales with the word "torture."

The dismissal of eight U.S. attorneys late last year further called into question his independence and his ability to fend off the political busybodies. At a news conference in March, Gonzales said the U.S. Justice Department is a big place and that he couldn't be expected to know about every decision that is made. A month later, he wrote in a piece carried on our pages that he made the decision to fire the attorneys and called it a "well-intended management effort."

While that issue was simmering, we learned of Gonzales' extraordinary effort, back when he was White House counsel, to get former U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft to sign off on a warrantless wiretapping program that the Justice Department objected to. Ashcroft was hospitalized at the time and Gonzales visited him in the hospital. Witnesses described Ashcroft as "feeble" and "barely articulate." Gonzales said he was "lucid."

"I acknowledge that mistakes were made here," Gonzales said in his March news conference on the attorney firings. The biggest mistake may have been his failure to understand that political appointees and politicians who become prosecutors must put the law first at all times. We hope the missteps of Alberto Gonzales remind our state attorney general, our federal prosecutor and our county attorneys of the need to be above partisan meddling and, above all, fair.

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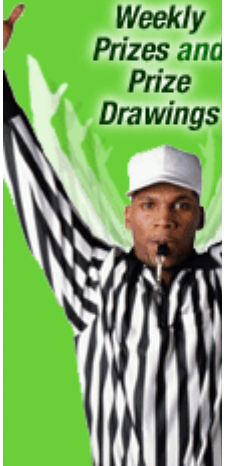
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