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JUST WHAT DID THE DOCTOR ORDER?

HOW MUCH hospitality do pharmaceutical companies provide to doctors at sponsored educational events and what sort of influence does it have over the drugs they prescribe to their patients?

These are some of the questions that have long concerned the public over the relationship between doctors and drug companies.

But a recent landmark decision by the Australian Competition Tribunal, backing an earlier decision of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, has now put pharmaceutical sponsored hospitality on the table.

In an effort to provide transparency in the area, the tribunal agreed with the ACCC that details of educational meetings and symposia held or sponsored by drug companies need to be made public.

Under the tribunal's ruling, Medicines Australia, the peak body representing the \$7.8 billion-a-year pharmaceuticals industry in Australia, is now required to publish on its website the details of events held by its members and the type and cost of hospitality supplied to medical practitioners.

While Medicines Australia initially appealed the ACCC's decision by taking it to the tribunal, it has since accepted the ruling and has moved quickly to implement the new reporting requirements as part of its code of conduct, which was originally authorised by the ACCC in 2006.

The ACCC became concerned that existing scrutiny on the dining, accommodation, travel and other perks provided to doctors was insufficient, and that there was a risk doctors could be influenced in their prescribing through such hospitality. The tribunal agreed with the ACCC that the best way to deal with those concerns was to make public all hospitality provided to doctors.

The opportunity now exists for the pharmaceutical industry to rise to the challenge set first by the ACCC and reaffirmed by the tribunal.

Increasing transparency gives the medical industry an opportunity to demonstrate compliance with the restrictions on the provision of hospitality in its code and to ensure that hospitality provided to doctors is properly scrutinised. ●

