How does the revised ABPI code of practice affect what pharmacists do?

Are you wondering what the latest revision of the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry code of practice means for you? Jane Landles describes how you can find out in a new e-learning module launched this week.

The ethical standards that the pharmaceutical industry needs to meet when promoting medicines are set out in the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry Code of Practice for the Pharmaceutical Industry 2011. The code was updated last year and most of the changes become fully operative at the beginning of next month.

In order to increase health professionals’ knowledge of the code, this week has been Code Awareness Week, organised by the Prescription Medicines Code of Practice Authority.

Pharmacists working in the pharmaceutical industry in particular need to know about the code and its provisions. But any pharmacist on the receiving end of the industry’s marketing efforts should also be aware of the latest changes. These include no longer giving away branded promotional aids, increasing transparency between health professionals and industry colleagues and allowing pharmacists in industry to take more responsibility for the approval of promotional material.

Pharmacists should understand how the code fits with the General Pharmaceutical Council’s standards of conduct, ethics and performance. To help with this, the PMCPA has developed an e-learning module about the code for health professionals. The module is a free training resource and has been certified as conforming to continuing professional development guidelines. It is available from the PMCPA website at www.pmcpa.org.uk/.

The module investigates the relationship between the industry and health professionals by focusing on the responsibilities of both sides when entering agreements about sponsorship, meeting representatives, medical education, attending meetings or working as a consultant.

A “Quick guide to the code for health professionals” has been developed to complement the module. It is also available to download from the PMCPA website.

Although some complaints about companies’ activities are submitted to the PMCPA by competitor companies, on average more complaints are received from health professionals. Typically complainants will allege that a company’s promotional claims are misleading and submit published studies.

About the author
Jane Landles is a pharmacist and secretary of the PMCPA. She is also a member of the PMCPA’s code of practice panel.
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and other literature in support of their position. The PMCPA has a code of practice panel whose job is to evaluate the parties’ submissions to determine where the balance of the evidence lies. There is an appeals procedure for parties that do not accept the panel’s rulings.

One of the keys to successful self-regulation is transparency and all the complaints proceedings are published in the form of case reports both online (www.pmcpa.org.uk) and in the quarterly “Code of practice review”. The publication of case reports acts as both a sanction for the offending company and as a learning tool for others. In addition, for the most serious cases, an advertisement with brief details of the case is published in the professional press, including The Pharmaceutical Journal.

History of code and latest version

The ABPI introduced its first code in 1958 and it has been regularly reviewed and revised since. A new code came into operation on 1 January 2011. It applies to the promotion of medicines to members of the UK health professions and to appropriate administrative staff; it also applies to a number of areas which are non-promotional and sets standards for the provision of information to patients and the public about prescription-only medicines. It covers the provision of medical and educational goods and services, outcome or risk sharing agreements, patient access schemes, joint working between the pharmaceutical industry and the NHS and the use of health professionals as consultants. It reflects and extends beyond UK law; its aim is to ensure that the promotion of medicines is carried out within a robust framework to support high quality patient care.

What is important for pharmacists?

Since some pharmacists now have prescribing responsibilities, it is especially important that they are aware of how they can ethically and successfully work with pharmaceutical companies. In addition to the GPhC standards of conduct, ethics and performance, the ABPI code is a useful resource for a pharmacist when considering promotional materials or meeting with a representative, joint working opportunities, sponsorship and medical education.

Top tips for health professionals

The pharmaceutical industry is committed to benefiting patients by operating in a professional, ethical and transparent manner. With increasing pressure on the NHS to meet targets, deliver a good service to patients and keep up to date it is important for the industry and the NHS to look at a variety of ways to work together to achieve the best outcome for patients.

In January 2010, the PMCPA organised a “Working with the pharmaceutical industry” roadshow for NHS employees in the north west of England. Participants suggested that the PMCPA produce some “top tips” in order to help NHS employees develop ethical and professional relationships with the pharmaceutical industry (see Panel below).

The ABPI Code of Practice and the “Quick guide to the code for health professionals” can be accessed at www.pmcpa.org.uk. Printed copies are available free of charge by telephoning 020 7747 8885.

TOP TIPS FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS WORKING WITH THE PHARMACEUTICAL INDUSTRY

Know the regulations

The promotion of medicines for prescribing to health professionals and others by pharmaceutical companies is strictly controlled by the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry’s Code of Practice for the Pharmaceutical Industry. Many other activities, including certain non-promotional activities, are also covered by it. Health professionals and NHS managers have their own codes and other requirements for working ethically and transparently. There may also be local guidance. Keep regulations and guidance in mind when contacted by, approaching or working with the pharmaceutical industry.

What’s in it for the patient?

Whether meeting a representative, attending a training event or setting up a joint working project always remember to put the patient’s needs first.

Ask, ask and ask again!

Do not be afraid to seek advice or ask pharmaceutical companies questions. Ask for claims in promotional materials to be explained and justified. If you are concerned about attending educational events, talk to your colleagues and seek their advice. Remember the PMCPA offers training on the code and can give informal advice.

Meeting representatives

As well as providing information on their individual products, representatives can offer information on disease areas and may have useful information for you to pass to patients. If you are not used to seeing representatives, ask a colleague to join you or arrange a local area meeting. Remember, if you are unsure about the information being presented ask for an explanation.

Be transparent

Under the ABPI code, the involvement of a pharmaceutical company in any project or activity must be made clear. It should be obvious from the outset which company is supporting the conference or publication, etc. The industry and health professionals can legitimately and productively work together, but transparency is vital.

Seek out and share information

Pharmaceutical companies are a useful source of information on the medicines that they market. Talk to a number of pharmaceutical companies and make informed choices. Set up networks with your colleagues to share information.

Consider goods and services

Medical and educational goods and services which will enhance patient care or benefit the NHS and maintain patient care are permitted under the ABPI code. However they must not be provided in such a way as to be an inducement to prescribe, supply, administer, recommend, buy or sell any medicine and must not bear a product name, but can bear a company name. Therapy review programmes, which aim to ensure an individual patient receives optimal treatment following a clinical assessment, are permitted and can be a productive way to improve patient care by working with the pharmaceutical industry.

Have realistic expectations

There are restrictions on relationships between the NHS and the pharmaceutical industry which protect all parties, especially patients. Be honest and frank at the outset about these restrictions and what you expect to gain from the relationship. This will help avoid misunderstandings later on.

WHAT IS THE PMCPA?

The Prescription Medicines Code of Practice Authority (PMCPA) was established in 1993 to administer the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry Code of Practice for the Pharmaceutical Industry at arm’s length from the ABPI itself. The authority was created to separate self-interest from self-regulation. It is self-funded, has its own staff and is not part of the operation of the ABPI. The ABPI and PMCPA exist in parallel. The authority offers advice and training on the ABPI code as well as handling complaints made against pharmaceutical companies. For further information about the complaints procedure, visit www.pmcpa.org.uk/complaints/.

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