Food for thought for food animal veterinarians

A cruise, a putter, a pair of skis

Recently, I was visiting with my physician about my left shoulder, which is evidencing years of the stress of bovine rectal palpations. He gave me a physician's sample of a drug for arthritis and stated he had never used the drug. He added that he recently enjoyed a two-day outing of golf in a resort area as a guest of a drug manufacturer introducing the new drug. I asked if he, as a physician, was involved in cruises, golf outings, or visits to ski areas courtesy of drug manufacturers, and he responded with a tone of guilt in his voice—"Yes, frequently."

This opened up an hour of conversation (I wasn't charged for the time) relative to the practice of pharmaceutical companies entertaining veterinarians and physicians in order to promote their products. During my professional career, I have been grateful for countless pencils, key rings, mini-calculators, and other gadgets given to me by pharmaceutical companies. Yet, my physician friend and I were asking each other the same question—"Do those 'gifts' influence members of the medical professions to use certain products over tried and tested products?"

In the December 14 issue of USA Today, on the editorial page, the issue of pharmaceutical companies giving "freebies" to physicians was addressed in a point/counterpoint presentation involving Massachusetts Senator Edward Kennedy and Gerald J. Mossinghoff, President of the Pharmaceutical Manufacturer's Association. Senator Kennedy stated that "these abusive schemes are subverting the health care system and doctors are jeopardizing their objectivity and undermining patients' sacred trust." Recent Senate hearings following a year-long investigation named companies and a list of conflicts. The companies named did not show up to defend their promotional activities. On the eve of the hearings, the American Medical Association and the Pharmaceutical Manufacturer's Association rushed into print with voluntary guidelines to prevent future abuses.

G. J. Mossinghoff stated that the new guidelines provide specifically that physicians can no longer accept freebies, but defended the practice of sponsoring seminar vacations as a means of educating physicians and emphasized that the new guidelines will permit the pharmaceutical industry to maintain essential communications with physicians.

How seriously are veterinarians affected by all the forms of freebies offered to members of the profession? This is not just a relationship between one veterinarian and a drug company, but, when one observes the advertising or, better yet, goods and services offered at all of our veterinary association meetings by pharmaceutical concerns, it prompts one to wonder why our profession is not willing to pay for its own social amenities.

I wonder whether acceptance of seminar vacations, golf outings, and ski trips might influence professional judgment in dispensing or prescribing. An other question that arises is the total cost of entertaining many, many veterinarians as it affects the cost of the drug to the ultimate consumer. What does a two-day trip to a ski resort cost when multiplied by hundreds of attendees? The question has led me to ponder the situation when food animal producers fail to use a product because of its cost. Recently, I listened to a sheep producer with 8,000 breeding ewes discuss the use of anthelmintics in his flock. He pointed out that there was a difference of 50 cents per animal when two products were compared. It made me question whether efficacy or cost should be the determining factor in the purchase of a product.

Back to my physician friend who questioned whether the monies spent on product promotion in the form of trips and gifts could be better spent on the homeless or on those in financial need—or on research to improve the product itself. I could appreciate his feelings and questions and then I dwelt upon the food animal practitioner. If the freebies were curtailed, would the prices of medications be lowered by the drug manufacturer? Evidently, these freebies

Prepared by John B. Herrick, DVM, 7807 N Calle Caballeros, Paradise Valley, AZ 85253. Others are welcome to contribute to this feature. Please contact the editor-in-chief for details.
must be cost-effective, or the large drug companies would not spend millions to woo members of our profession. My observation is that veterinarians invited to participate in cruises, ski events, and other social amenities offered by drug companies are usually those with a large practice. Seldom are veterinarians with small gross income invited. Wooing them might not be considered cost-effective.

This entire discourse is intended to trigger food animal practitioners to seriously question whether gifts received from drug companies influence the dispensing or prescribing of drugs, especially new drugs. Is the old adage, “Never be the first to use a new drug, nor the last to discard an old one,” still the guideline for selection of animal health products by food animal practitioners? Is the welfare of the patient still first and foremost in our selection of products? If not, it should be!