Academics on the payroll: the advertising you don’t see

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In the endless drive to get people’s attention, advertising is going ‘native’, creeping in to places formerly reserved for editorial content. In this Native Advertising series we find out what it looks like, if readers can tell the difference, and more importantly, whether they care.

Academic medical researchers are hot property for companies marketing pharmaceuticals, complementary medicines, medical devices, fitness equipment, weight loss products, “health foods” and other health-related goods and services. Their opinions are highly respected by the general public, and their endorsement in the media of a product can help to ensure consumers and patients purchase it, or at least discuss it with their “health care provider”.

But this raises a question: why would an academic researcher choose to endorse a health-related product in the general media?

The most worrying explanation is that the academic is being employed by the company to speak favourably about its product. Such commercial relationships are rarely made transparent and rely on a public perception that academics are objective observers and commentators. For the most part, however, this is unlikely to be the case.

A far more likely explanation is that any academic endorsement occurs in the context of a long and mutually productive relationship with the company concerned. Academics are frequently targeted by companies on the grounds that they provide authority and act as “key opinion leaders” who are able to influence the opinions, beliefs and behaviours of others in both professional and public arenas.

This relationship with industry is frequently one of many. Academics who comment on products have frequently partnered with the company in its clinical trials of the product; put his or her name to the resulting academic publications; provided strategic advice on how to have the product regulated and perhaps subsidised by the government; or given talks to other academics and clinicians about the research (if not the product itself).
The veneer of independence

Academics who act as key opinion leaders generally see themselves as “independent” research partners, consultants, educators or commentators, whose work is filtered through academic peer review, and who is free to discover, publish and say whatever they wish.

Unfortunately, however, this is simply not true. There is now a compelling body of research showing that even non-pecuniary “entanglements” with industry create “ties that bind” that subtly and unconsciously shape opinion leaders’ views of companies and their products.

Indeed, it is often non-financial entanglements that are the most influential, such as “research collaborations” and policy consultancies. The professional reputation, public influence and career advancement that stem from being a recognised expert can be just as influential as any direct payment for “services.” Such inducements are also potentially more influential than any vintage wines, extravagant “educational” dinners, or all-expenses-paid trips to conferences. Which is perhaps why the pharmaceutical industry has been willing to self-regulate and no longer lavishes expensive gifts on doctors and research academics.

So what does this mean for those on the receiving end of academic commentary in the media? Importantly, it does not mean academic opinion leaders should simply be ignored or their commentary discounted. Academic opinion leaders are often the most qualified people to comment on potentially significant products and services. But it does mean, however, that both those who write the news, and those who read it, need to be alert to the complex genesis of “expert” opinion.

For this to be possible, relationships between academics and industry need to be transparent. Unfortunately, most universities in Australia do not currently demand public disclosure of all such relationships, so journalists and readers cannot always be sure just how entangled a particular academic commentator might be.

Transparency is not enough

Transparency does not, however, in and of itself, tell the journalist or reader how significant any entanglement really is, and whether the academic commentator can or cannot be trusted to give an objective view.

On the one hand, disclosures of commercial relationships could lead to the inappropriate exclusion of the academic from public and professional comment. It’s important to note that researchers who engage with industry usually do so with the best of intentions and are doing exactly what today’s universities expect them to do — which is to innovate, commercialise and build income streams through relationships with industry.

On the other hand, greater transparency could lull all concerned into a false sense of security based upon the belief that transparency is all that’s needed to ensure integrity, and that what is in the open cannot be wrong or harmful. Sunshine is rarely a sufficient disinfectant.

Rather than focus solely on transparency, therefore, what is needed is a comprehensive and pre-emptive strategy that enables productive and ethically-sound interactions between academics and industry, while at the same time proscribing the kinds of interactions that are likely to lead to bias and adverse social outcomes.
Developing and instituting these strategies is the job of academics, professional groups and governments — not journalists, and certainly not news consumers, who should be able to rely on academic commentators to give an accurate, informed and balanced and disinterested view of any health-related product.