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EDITORIAL

Drugs and Disclosure

We've long feared that the integrity of medical research is being eroded by conflicts of interest and manipulation of scientific data. Still, it was disheartening to learn that one of the nation's most prominent psychiatrists has taken large, undisclosed payments from a drug company whose products he evaluated and that another company manipulated studies to make a drug look far more beneficial than it actually is.

As Gardiner Harris reported in The Times, Congressional investigators found that Dr. Charles Nemeroff of Emory University — the principal investigator on a government-financed study of antidepressant drugs made by GlaxoSmithKline — repeatedly promised to keep his consulting fees from Glaxo below \$10,000 a year in compliance with federal and university conflict-of-interest rules. He took far more than that, mostly for giving talks promoting the company's drugs to other doctors.

All told, according to Senator Charles Grassley, who has spearheaded the inquiry, Dr. Nemeroff failed to report some half-a-million dollars in fees and expenses from Glaxo while he led the study.

Dr. Nemeroff has declined to comment beyond assuring Emory that he followed university disclosure regulations "to the best of my knowledge." The university is investigating. But the Congressional investigation was based on reports from drug companies on their payments to Dr. Nemeroff.

This episode underscores the need for Congress to pass a bipartisan bill, sponsored by Mr. Grassley and Senator Herb Kohl, that would require drug companies and other medical manufacturers to publicly disclose payments to physicians that exceed \$500 a year.

Meanwhile, there is strong evidence that Pfizer and its Warner-Lambert unit have been manipulating the publication of studies to bolster the use of their epilepsy drug Neurontin to treat other disorders for which it has not been approved. As reported recently by The Times's Stephanie Saul, experts who reviewed thousands of internal documents that surfaced in a lawsuit against the company concluded that Pfizer had used several tactics to mislead physicians about Neurontin.

The tactics included delaying publication of studies that found no evidence that the drug worked for some disorders, spinning negative data to make it look more positive and bundling negative data with positive findings to neutralize the results. Pfizer denies any such manipulation. It will be up to the courts to pass final judgment on what looks like tawdry behavior.

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