

## Conflicts of Interest: Why Should Patients Care?

Trust is a basic need we all have when getting health care. It's a scientific fact that a trusting relationship with the care provider helps the healing process. We like to think all our doctors and nurses look out for us as their No. 1 and only concern. But we're learning that isn't always true. Conflicts of interest are pervasive in health care, with drug and medical device companies spending hundreds of millions of dollars each year to influence decisions by their doctor clients. And fee-for-service doctors can have their own conflicts when they profit financially from aggressive testing and treatment.

### So what can we do as patients?

I tell my clients: Trust, but verify. Ask questions that might show if your doctor has more than just your interests at heart. Here are two questions you can ask just for starters:

- "Do you (or, Does your office) accept any gifts from drug manufacturers or sales representatives? If so, what?" (Read an eye-opening news account about the lengths some drug companies have taken to woo doctors [here](#) .)
- "Who owns the equipment that you recommend I be tested on? Do you have any financial stake in my getting this test?"

Whether or not a patient should get an expensive imaging scan or some other elaborate and expensive test is not always clearcut. But what should be clearcut is that doctors should not have a thumb on the scale when they're balancing harms versus benefits. A news story about what happened when a group of

urologists in Iowa ordered a new CT scanner for their office sheds light on this conflict of interest issue. Read [more](#) here.

The state of Vermont requires disclosures of drug manufacturer payments to doctors, and patients there may be able to learn these details without having to ask pesky and embarrassing questions to their doctors. Read more about the Vermont plan [here](#).

A final thought: No practitioner wants to admit that his or her recommendations for your health care could be influenced by ulterior motives. You will hear plenty of rationalizations and indignant denials if you probe into this at your doctor's office. Behavioral research proves time and again that even small gifts can create strong if subconscious incentives to reciprocate, and the real proof is the huge sums that medical device makers and drug companies spend on these gifts.

Even free samples of drugs in the doctor's office carry a hidden cost that makes thoughtful and careful practitioners question their use. Read [more here](#). So if your doctor accepts no gifts from manufacturers, and doesn't even use free samples, that's a good thing.

I have other articles on my patient safety blog about conflicts of interest in medicine. [Click here to read more](#).