

Are TVNs unduly influenced by industry?

Pauline Beldon, Chair, TVNA

In June this year, the submission made by Advanced Medical Solutions (AMS) to the government's Health Committee left many tissue viability nurses (TVNs) feeling affronted. The submission appeared to suggest that TVNs act as final arbiters for the products they use but have no financial responsibility and insinuated that TVNs can be persuaded to use certain products, for example, through sponsorship to attend conferences. However uncomfortable this was for TVNs to hear, the submission raised some important issues.

We as TVNs have an obligation to be transparent in our dealings with trusts, our TVN colleagues and with industry. AMS raised the possibility that TVNs were being unduly influenced by industry and I suspect this has caused many of us to reflect upon our practice and whether our relationship with industry is indeed a healthy one. The possibility that TVNs could become unduly influenced, perhaps without even realising it, needs to be reflected on.

Many of the companies producing wound management products are members of the Surgical Dressing Manufacturers Association (SDMA), which states in its Code of Practice that manufacturers are, 'encouraged to adopt high ethical standards of practice in the advertising and promotion of products'. This regulatory code acts as a reassurance to TVNs that individual companies are not seeking to exert undue influence. However, if such an instance does occur, there is a complaints procedure, which can be accessed on the SDMA website.

Interestingly, however, membership of the SDMA, and hence adherence to the code of practice, is voluntary (for example, AMS is not a member). Perhaps, in the interests of transparency, there needs to be a campaign of lobbying to ensure that membership to the SDMA becomes mandatory.

While the tone of the submission made by AMS was unfortunate, it did raise some important issues and should galvanise TVNs into realising that if they want to maintain a service to patients they need to highlight the value of what they provide.

While it is true that industry does sponsor nurses and other healthcare professionals to attend conferences, it is clearly understood by all parties that this is not an inducement to use the companies' products. It is generally accepted that the price of any product provides a company with funds for research, education and sponsorship opportunities. While this needs to be examined closely, it is the responsibility of the Department of Health (DoH) to demand transparency regarding issues such as the pricing of products and research funding. These should be governed by regulation, rather than being the responsibility of individual TVNs.

All nurses are bound by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) code

of conduct and this makes it clear that nurses should not take inducements. But should we, as TVNs, examine this more closely? If those in industry believe that nurses can be financially persuaded to use certain products this casts doubt on the integrity of nurses; as TVNs we should be overt in our dealings with all companies.

Part of any TVNs' role includes managing a budget and it is vital that the instigation of any formulary is seen as a collaborative, multidisciplinary process. This should include, for example, auditing the use of wound dressings to demonstrate whether they are clinically beneficial and cost-effective and it is important that TVNs highlight these skills to publicise their value to trusts. As the AMS submission queried whether TVNs do indeed work in this way, it is vital that we as TVNs are able to demonstrate our worth.

While the tone of the submission made by AMS was unfortunate, it did raise some important issues and should galvanise TVNs into realising that if they want to maintain a service to patients they need to highlight the value of what they provide. A group has been formed with members from the national tissue viability/wound care associations and respected members of the tissue viability community to approach the DoH with evidence of the worth of TVNs, especially bearing in mind the growing elderly population and associated increase in chronic wounds. It is vital that we as TVNs stand up to be counted and work collaboratively to share whatever evidence we possess in order to further our cause.

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