

Editor earned more than \$20m in royalties from device manufacturer

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A medical journal editor who received millions of dollars from a medical device manufacturer wrote and edited articles favourable to the manufacturer without stating his conflicts of interest to readers.

Thomas Zdeblick, a University of Wisconsin orthopaedic surgeon who took over as editor in chief of the *Journal of Spinal Disorders & Techniques* in 2002, received more than \$20m (€12.4m; £14m) in patent royalties and \$2m in consulting fees from Medtronic for spinal implants sold by the company during his tenure as editor. The amount of money Dr Zdeblick received became public in January 2009 as a result of an investigation into spinal device products launched by the US senator Charles Grassley (<http://policymed.typepad.com/files/grassley-letter-to-university-of-wisconsin-january-12---2009.pdf>).

Now a Milwaukee, Wisconsin, newspaper, the *Journal Sentinel*, has conducted a review of all articles published by the medical journal during Dr Zdeblick's tenure as editor in chief (www.jsonline.com/watchdog/watchdogreports/80036277.html). The newspaper found that since 2002 the journal has published at least once in every issue, on average, studies involving Medtronic's spinal products or products that were funded by Medtronic. The journal became "a conduit for positive research articles involving Medtronic spinal products," the article said.

The journal's co-founder, Dan Spengler, who was co-editor until 2000, said that the journal has substantially increased its focus on spinal products since 2002.

Dr Zdeblick coauthored three articles on Medtronic's Infuse device, a device for which he receives patent royalties. The device has come under scrutiny since officials at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center and the University of Washington found that Timothy Kuklo, a top surgeon with ties to Medtronic, conducted research on the Infuse device that was found to be improperly reported. Dr Kuklo resigned his post as associate professor of medicine at Washington University, St Louis, in September 2009.

Dr Zdeblick's relationship to Medtronic, referred to by the *Journal Sentinel* as a "beautiful friendship," was defended by Wolters Kluwer Health & Pharma Solutions, the Philadelphia based publisher of the *Journal of Spinal Disorders & Techniques*. In an emailed statement to the *Journal Sentinel* its director of communications, Robert Dekker, said, "Thanks to our strict peer review policies and processes, we have no concerns about the existence of this relationship."

Some articles published by the journal were about devices for which Dr Zdeblick receives royalties and were coauthored by Dr Zdeblick himself. According to the *Journal Sentinel* review most of the articles were favourable to Medtronic and often did not disclose financial ties between the authors and Medtronic.

Dr Zdeblick's financial ties in his role as journal editor have come under fire. Pritpal Tamber, publishing director of the Map of Medicine website (www.mapofmedicine.com) and former council member of the Committee on Publication Ethics, said, "When I read the story my blood boiled. This chap should no longer be a surgeon . . . and Wolters Kluwer should be investigated for their seemingly lax approach to science publishing."

Dr Tamber wants to see a review of all the journal's articles. He said, "What can researchers do now? To be safe they should ignore any article published in the journal during Zdeblick's tenure."

Some ethicists say that editors should be allowed to have ties to manufacturers as long as they are open about them. The Association for Medical Ethics has said that editors should not receive more than \$50 000 from a drug or device company. But Marcia Angell, former editor in chief of the *New England Journal of Medicine* said that such conflicts should be prohibited.

She said, "At the *New England Journal of Medicine* editors were prohibited from having any financial ties to the health industry . . . [with the] same prohibition for authors of editorials and review articles."

Dr Zdeblick did not respond to inquiries from the *BMJ*.

Notes

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