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A cautionary tale

There are times when we can all be taken advantage of, and times when we all act in haste rather than think things through. I can think of countless examples from my own past. But an event occurred recently that highlighted one area where dentists may unknowingly allow themselves to be involved in a slightly unethical practice, and I thought the example would act as a cautionary tale that was worth telling.

The story began at the *BDJ* editorial office with the arrival of a letter intended for publication. The letter described a small research project carried out in practice, and drew conclusions that favoured a named commercial product for treatment of a minor oral condition (I am deliberately being vague for obvious reasons). Apart from the obvious recommendation of one commercial product the letter was initially very similar to many we publish about interesting findings in practice.

On reading the letter my immediate reaction was one of suspicion. The letter read more like an advertisement for the product than a genuine letter, and over the years I have developed a fairly sensitive 'radar' for promotional material disguised as editorial. I was also suspicious of the science of the research, so I sent the letter to a referee. The referee's report I received confirmed my suspicions, and clarified that the conclusions drawn from the research were not scientifically valid.

My first thought was to try and contact the author of the letter to provide guidance on how to rewrite the letter. I usually do this because I dislike simply rejecting letters (especially written by enthusiastic practitioners) and do try to help them towards publication. Having made contact (by telephone) I explained my concerns to the author, and that was when the real story behind the origin of the letter began to unravel.

On hearing my concerns the dentist admitted that he had not written the letter, even though his name was given as the author. The letter had been written by the PR division of the company producing the product named in the letter. The dentist had genuinely carried out the research (and had been paid to do it) but had not

even thought about publicising it until it was suggested by the company who had asked the dentist to write up the findings as a letter for publication. When the dentist had declined (on the grounds of being too busy) the company had offered to write the letter for him - and the dentist had agreed. That was how the letter ended up at the *BDJ* offices.

There are a number of concerns here. Firstly, it is obviously most unwise to allow your name to be used as the author of a letter you did not write, however innocuous. In this case though the dentist could have inadvertently created considerable problems for himself if the letter had been published. For example, suppose other commercial companies in the field had objected to the findings, who knows where it could have led?

The next concern is the potential conflict for anyone involved in providing advice when financial gain enters the equation. This was summarised well in a previous *BDJ* (*BDJ* 1999; 187: 61-62) and remains a constant danger whenever a commercial company pays practitioners for testing out materials. Of course payment does not automatically mean unethical behaviour, but it can be much harder to remain unbiased when money is involved.

Thirdly, publication carries with it certain responsibilities. People tend to believe the perceived authority of the printed word (even though we know it is often incorrect or biased) which means authors must be sure of their facts and the effect their words may have on others. This is why the *BDJ* has so many checks on everything we receive, and we still sometimes make mistakes.

So what does all this tell us? Firstly, to ensure that any publication (even a letter) has been written by the person claiming to write it. Secondly for practitioners to beware of unscrupulous companies using their name and their credibility simply to promote products or services. Lastly, it may sound old-fashioned, but we must always strive to be true to ourselves and our profession.

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