

Review of circulars and official publications

By A. C. BOWER, MR PHARMS

Our regular review continues with a look at health service publications on ethical standards in commercial sponsorship, improving the working lives of NHS employees, the decontamination of medical devices, and emergency hormonal contraception

The Department of Health website (<http://www.doh.gov.uk/comspon1.htm>) published "Commercial sponsorship: ethical standards for the NHS", on November 24, 2000. Commercial sponsorship is defined as including NHS funding from an external source, including funding of all or part of the costs of a member of staff, NHS research, staff training, pharmaceuticals, equipment, meeting rooms, costs associated with meetings, meals, gifts, hospitality, hotel and transport costs (including trips abroad), provision of free services (speakers), buildings or premises. All sponsorship deals must be recorded in a register held by the trust and made available on request to the public and at all health authority board meetings. The guidance gives a reminder that, under the Medicines (Advertising) Regulations 1994, no person who is qualified to prescribe or supply relevant medicinal products may solicit or accept any gift, pecuniary advantage, benefit in kind, hospitality or sponsorship prohibited by the regulation. The penalty for such an offence is a fine of up to £5,000.

The guidance indicates that the need to declare sponsorship does not apply to personal gifts of less than £25 per gift, except where several gifts worth over £100 are received from the same or closely related sources in a 12-month period, or to discounts on particular pharmaceuticals. It is suggested that hospital trusts which are offered significant discounts on drugs may wish to consult primary care groups/primary care trusts about possible implications for

subsequent prescribing in primary care. Deals where sponsorship is linked to the purchase of particular products or to supply from particular sources are not allowed unless these have been subject to a transparent tender process for a defined package of goods or services. Reasonable, actual costs for hospitality at meetings is permitted provided that this does not exceed the level which recipients would normally adopt when paying for themselves. Such sponsorship must be declared in the papers for the meeting and in any published proceedings.

Any existing sponsorship arrangements should be reviewed and hospital pharmacy managers should ensure that all pharmacy staff are aware of this guidance. It would be advisable to ensure that any situation where there is doubt about what is acceptable is referred to the pharmacy manager for further consideration.

"Improving working lives standard: NHS employers committed to improving the working lives of people who work in the NHS" was published on the DoH website on October 4, 2000, but it may not yet have achieved a priority for action within hospital pharmacies.

The document requires that all NHS trusts make a pledge, by April, 2001, to implement the standard and are accredited by April, 2003, as putting the standard into practice. There are separate components of the standard which relate to modern employment practices, balancing work and home life, developing working arrangements, valuing and supporting staff, and professional development opportunities. Hospital pharmacy managers should be prepared to respond and contribute to overall trust initiatives as these are developed.

HSC 2000/032 entitled "Decontamination of medical devices" was issued on October 18, 2000. This notes that the decontamination of re-usable medical devices is essential in reducing the risk of transmission of infectious agents. The circular sets out immediate and short-term actions to ensure that decontamination is carried out effectively and gives the information needed to establish a database of decontamination provision. Trusts should already have submitted details of the person with overall responsibility for decontamination aspects, management arrangements for decontamination, any issues of immediate risk to patients and staff, together with an action plan for these to be addressed, and the age/condition of decontamination facilities and equipment. The next stage involves a comprehensive review by the end of March, 2001, to develop another action plan against the controls assurance decontamination standard. Steps must be taken by the end of March, 2002, to enable the tracing of instrument sets to patients on whom they have been used. Further information and details of checklists for completion are available at <http://www.nhsestates.gov.uk>.

An announcement was made in December, 2000, on the DoH website which indicated that levonorgestrel 0.75mg for emergency hormonal contraception was to be classified as a "pharmacy only" medicine. This would apply from January 1, although the product would not be available in pharmacies until after that date. Guidance on best practice for supply has since been made available by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain and supportive training has also been announced by the Centre for Pharmacy Postgraduate Education.

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