

The Truth  *About Health*

Fake Medical Journals from Merck Come to Light at Australian Vioxx Trial

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Merck and Co. marketing in Australia has reached a new level of deception. It has come to light in a court proceeding that the international pharmaceutical manufacturing company paid an international publishing giant to create a marketing publication disguised as a peer-review medical journal.

The publication known as the Australasian Journal of Bone and Joint Medicine was published by Excerpta Medica. This organization is a division of Elsevier, the self acclaimed world-leading publisher of scientific, technical and medical information products and services. The publication was produced under the direction of Merck and its Australian subsidiary Merck, Sharp & Dohme Australia (MSDA).

Evidence that the “journal” was nothing more than a marketing publication designed to look and read like a peer-review medical journal came to light in trial proceedings. The plaintiff in the case suffered a heart attack in 2003 while taking the anti-inflammatory drug Vioxx. In September 2004, Merck withdrew Vioxx from the market because of reports of increased risks of heart attack and stroke associated with its use.

Testimony was presented at the trial showing that the “average reader,” presumably a doctor, could easily mistake the publication for a true medical journal. Examination of journals that were published during 2003-04 was done by George Jelinek, an Australian physician who is a long-time member of the World Association of Medical Editors. In his trial testimony he stated, “Only close inspection of the journal, along with knowledge of medical journals and publishing conventions, enabled me to determine that the journal was not, in fact, a peer-review medical journal, but instead a marketing publication of MSDA.”

Dr. Jelinek pointed out content from four journal issues that he reviewed for the trial. Mainly they contained reprinted or summarized articles, most of which presented data favorable to Merck products and appeared to act solely as marketing tools. They listed no disclosure of any company sponsorship.

One of the issues in particular contained 9 of 29 articles related to Vioxx. The issue also had 12 stories about Fosamax, another Merck product. All of the articles presented positive conclusions regarding MSDA drugs. “I can understand why a pharmaceutical company would collect a number of research papers with results favorable to their products and make these available to doctors,” said Dr. Jelinek. “This is straightforward marketing.”

Michael Hansen, the CEO of Elsevier’s Health Sciences Division, acknowledged that his company published the journal and accepted responsibility. “From 2000 to 2005 our Australia office published a series of sponsored article compilation publications, on behalf of pharmaceutical clients, that were made to look like journals and lacked the proper disclosures. This was an unacceptable practice and we regret that it took place.”

Sources: Open Access News. "Elsevier and Merck Publish Fake Medical Journal." May 2009. <http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/2009/05/elsevier-and-merck-published-fake.html>. Merck and Co. "Merck Responds to Questions about the Australasian Journal of Bone and Joint Medicine Journal." April 2009. http://www.merck.com/newsroom/vioxx/pdf/statement_20090430.pdf. Elsevier. "Statement from Michael Hansen, CEO of Elsevier's Health Sciences Division, Regarding Australia Based Sponsored Journal Practices Between 2000 and 2005." May 2009 http://www.elsevier.com/wps/find/authored_newsitem.cws_home/companynews05_01203.