Reviewer's report

Title: Advertising and disclosure of funding on patient organisation websites: a cross-sectional survey

Version: 1 Date: 16 May 2006

Reviewer: Lisa Prof Bero

Reviewer's report:

General

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

1. Add the access date for each website (in table). Although all were evaluated in the last month of 05, websites can change daily so the usual reference format included the exact access date.

2. Include the final n in the results in the abstract; or report percentages as X% (a/ total n).

3. Box 1 is interesting, but I'm not sure how this list of possible relationships was derived? Is this a theoretical list? I'm not sure how "Sponsoring research grants ..." fits in. Does this mean join sponsorship by a pharmaceutical co and the patient organization? Something obvious that seems to be missing from the list is "educational pamphlets for patients" I see these around doctors' offices all the time.

4. I would not use any abbreviations in the text - I find them confusing compared to spelling out the full words.

5. Could you justify the selection of countries where the website could be hosted? Why not just limit to english language only?

6. The description of items assessed in the methods (e.g., pharmaceutical co funding, sponsorship, advertising,other does not correspond with the presentation of items in the results: structural quality, advertising, etc. I suggest describing the items assessed in the same order in the methods and results.

7. Could you provide an example of the wording for " a website that was clear in how the organization derived all its funds"?

8. Sites based in south africa are singled out in the results quite a bit - I'm not sure of the significance of this. Under section on "annual reports and financial disclosure" comments are made by disease state (depression) and country (S.A.) Sticking to comparisons by disease state makes more sense to me.

9. Remind readers of your baseline sample size as you present results. For example, instead of saying "only 3 sites," say 3/69.

10. Under "General advertising," para 1, I don't understand what "we include it as a collectors piece" means.

11. Would it be possible to show a screen shot of the site sponsored by a local steakhouse? Great example

12. Under para 2, section on annual reports, I don't know what MSD means.

13. Same para - it's not clear why a patient site is mentioning pharma donations to research fellowships .. could more context be provided?
14. Could you provide a list of corporate donators who were not pharmaceutical companies? It would be useful to know what other types of interests sponsor these sites.

15. Great quotes in para before discussion regaring why companies sponsor sites.

16. I suggest restructuring the discussion around the recommendations - which data from the study supported the recommendation and details of what is recommended (eg, recommendation 1 recommends standardized reporting - what should this contain? give an example of a good disclosure) This would eliminate some of the editorial comments such as "One may wonder which other POs groups owe their birth and life to Pharma."

17. Good discussion of limitations although the obvious one of being a cross sectional study of rapidly changing media is not mentioned.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

1. The studied websites were not compared re transparency of funding with any other type of website, so we don't really know if their disclosure of funding is standard or not. I'm not suggesting another study, but is there any literature analyzing other types of websites that could be referenced?

2. I'd like to see a copy of the assessment tool included as an appendix.

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.