

# Medical Information: tainted or pure?

by Dr. Delia Chiamonte, [Baltimore Health Examiner](#)



Here's a secret: the medical information that you hear, whether on the radio, on TV or straight from your doctor's mouth, may not be as pure as you think. You might imagine that those medical experts on the morning news or big-shot specialists at Johns Hopkins are simply sharing straight-up facts. Think again.

As much as we, physicians, like to imagine that we are unbiased, there are many forces influencing us. Drug companies dangling generous consulting fees, the desire to please media sponsors, and the need to recruit patients for our research studies just to name a few.

I had a surprising experience recently that opened my eyes to how easy it is for bias to creep into medicine. A drug company representative contacted me after I had been quoted in the Wall Street Journal. First she flattered me "we are looking for distinguished physicians who are thought leaders in the community, and we wondered if you could spare a few minutes. We would like to offer you media exposure, first local, then possibly national." It sounded tempting. Then she offered me money.

I was feeling the pinch of starting a new patient advocacy practice and my bank account was precariously low. A little easy money would have been welcome. But once I understood what she was suggesting, it was clear to me that I couldn't accept her offer. To be honest, I felt a little sleazy just for considering it.

This was the deal: the drug company would get me appearances on TV and radio programs where I would function as a medical expert on the topic of their choice. I would share some medical nuggets and answer the host's questions, and by doing so I would educate the public. So far so good. But here is the catch. Since I would really be the drug company's undercover representative, I would need to mention their drug, casually and without drawing attention to it, and be sure to bathe it in a positive light. This got me thinking of all the times I had seen a medical expert on a morning news show, talking about migraines or allergies or ulcers. Were they all being paid by a drug

manufacturer?

Check out an informative article in [Slate](#) on this topic.

There is nothing wrong with advertising, of course. But advertising masquerading as news is sneaky and manipulative. Not only is it dishonest, it also reflects poorly on the ethical purity of my profession.

How could I not decline their offer? I hope that most of my colleagues would have done the same.

(photo courtesy of ABC news)

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