

Medical Ethics guidelines-the conundrum deepens by the day!

by Swadeep Srivastava



Be it a dinner at a CME program, a medical association election meet or a social gathering of doctors, no evening gathering of doctors across the country starts or ends without discussing MCI's new medical ethics guidelines. And the Predator—MCI President Dr Ketan Desai. The rumor mill has been abuzz with doctors calling each other to ask, 'Has Ketan Desai resigned from the post of President of MCI?' - 'Is he well, we got to know he just got a heart attack?' etc...And then the discussion moves in the direction of targeting Ketan Desai's personal matters, his so called corrupt past (when he was indicted by HC of Delhi on charges of corruption) etc----- 'How can MCI talk of ethics when they are not clean themselves?' - 'What is Dr Desai's agenda in bringing in this legislation at this time? Is he trying to change his image? Is he planning to enter politics? etc."

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So many questions and so many points of discussion and the simple fact that 'no one wants to follow these guidelines in toto!' Be it the Pharma companies, the ethical or not so ethical doctors, the medical device companies and any sane or insane creature related to the medical field in the country! The common basis for rejection is that these guidelines in the current form are not acceptable. The argument is that it is impossible to follow them or rather it is impractical! The questions are many - What is the alternate way of conducting CMEs; from where do we get sponsors? How will doctors travel (when they have never spent on their hotel or travel expenses ever from their pocket!) or if we do not give them travel & hospitality, why will a doctor come all the way, leaving his/ her busy practice and attend a CME which is not 'mandatory' for him/ her?

Most of the companies are busy finding out ways of circumventing the rules so that their work is not hampered and they and their doctors (privileged customers, high end prescribers) are not caught within the purview of these new MCI guidelines on 'Medical Ethics & Etiquettes'. On the other hand the doctors, particularly the ones who are not 'Faculty members' and still are and love to be simple 'delegates' are

totally confused. For them it is not a matter of whether they should pay for travel & stay for attending conferences & CMEs. It has rather become a matter of prestige, the question being how and why only doctors are targeted when it comes to "ethics"? Why only doctors are asked to be clean in their dealings? Why can the doctors not accept favours from the industry when all other professionals are free to accept favours from their vendors, clients and well-wishers?

The rationale seems to be that doctors are in a 'noble profession', they are respected as gods in the community and that in a sense they decide a patient's fate. So they cannot be seen as people who are influenced by the drug companies. A doctor's prescription is sacred. We can never



imagine a single blot on it! Considering the possibility that a drug/ product written by a doctor could be influenced by the incentives given by any company gives flutters to the people in the community...That is why you see so much uproar and so many debates and discussions on TV channels. That is why you see practically every newspaper and magazine doing features on the details of these guidelines and how these guidelines will affect the way medicine is practiced in India.

Again, the questions are many – ‘Who will be affected the most?’ ‘Will the doctors and Pharma companies find out alternate channels to circumvent these guidelines?’ etc.

But the heart of the matter still remains untouched. How will these guidelines be implemented practically? If we do not give a fair chance to the doctors as well as the Pharma and medical device companies we will need another set of guidelines or a notification, whose objective is to cleanse the system. If we do not give all the stakeholders a fair chance we will in all probability be a witness all over again to the practice of doctors going on junkets and taking bribes from Pharma sales people directly (mostly practiced by small time companies in tier two & three cities). To add insult to injury, these people will be doing all this under the nose of MCI & the Ministry of Health but they will be doing it in ways that they never get caught!

It is, of course important to ensure that the profession remains ‘noble’ and ethical on the whole. However, if we don’t let people have their say, we will see mockery being



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made of a ‘brilliant’ initiative! What we might witness is good doctors being caught unawares and penalized just because their compatriots were ‘jealous’. ‘Medical ethics regulations’ would then become a ‘dreaded tool’ to actually spoil the reputation of doctors and jeopardize the community’s belief in them and in

turn hamper patient welfare. The whole purpose of bringing out this notification would stand defeated.

The kind of negative publicity it has already generated for the medical community and the Pharma/ healthcare industry has cast a big shadow on the ‘brighter side’ of these two professions and brought all small & big, good & bad, ethical & not so ethical players to the same platform, in one ‘katghara’ and the public looks at all of them as ‘guilty’, trying to prove their innocence.

The MCI & The Ministry of Health should intervene and take some corrective measures before it is too late. They should sit and deliberate on issues like making CME hours mandatory for doctors, promoting more govt. initiated research & studies, asking hospitals to sponsor their doctors (govt or private) so that they can attend national & international conferences. The government and MCI should ensure that the knowledge base of the doctors keeps on expanding and their outlook keeps on broadening. They should take some initiatives and ensure that this amendment in medical ethics & etiquettes is done in a more amicable and practical way and that it is thoroughly discussed and deliberated upon. It is extremely important that all stakeholders are fully involved and a resolute methodology is worked out to make these guidelines practically implementable. Otherwise, it will not work well in the interests of the already dwindling fortunes of the medical professionals’ reputation! And this situation is not good for the country in the long run! It is not just a matter of one Dr Ketan Desai taking an initiative for some vested interest or otherwise. The issue is of ‘national’ interest and should be dealt with accordingly. 🇮🇳



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