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A.M.A. AIDE LET UPJOHN USE LETTER TO SELL DRUG

(By David Burnham)

WASHINGTON, July 7—The chief executive officer of the American Medical Association wrote a letter early this year to state and county officials of the association minimizing questions that had been raised in the association's own magazine about the safety of a widely used diabetes drug.

The official, according to confidential A.M.A. documents, then permitted the 1,100 salesmen of the largest manufacturer of the controversial drug to use his letter in their sales talks despite a warning that such use violated A.M.A. policy and might prove embarrassing.

Details about the distribution of the letter, written by Dr. James H. Sammons, executive vice president of the A.M.A., became known as the Food and Drug Administration published today a proposed rule requiring a new label for the drug stating that it may lead to death from heart disease.

The drugs are often called oral hypoglycemic drugs. They are taken by mouth by an estimated 1½ million adult diabetics to lower blood sugar level. The pills are believed to represent a $100-million market for the pharmaceutical industry.

Dr. Sammons sent his letter concerning oral hypoglycemics to the executives of state, county and medical speciality societies on Jan. 28.

The letter said that the Feb. 10 issue of The Journal of the American Medical Association would contain both an article and an editorial raising questions about the drugs.

Dr. Sammons said that the article, by a committee of the Biometric Society, supported an earlier critical study of oral hypoglycemics that had been challenged by some other scientists. He reported that the editorial, written by Dr. Thomas Chalmers, formerly with the National Institutes of Health, alleged that the drug might be associated with as many as 10,000 to 15,000 unnecessary deaths a year in the United States alone.

"A considerable body of expert scientific opinion contradicts these published findings," Dr. Sammons wrote. "Diabetic patients should not be influenced by press reports, and should continue on whatever diabetic management program their own physician had prescribed."

Shortly after Dr. Sammons wrote his letter, the Upjohn Company requested permission to reprint it for use by Upjohn salesmen. The company manufactures two oral hypoglycemic drug products under the brand names Orinase and Tolinase. The Upjohn product Orinase has been for years the most widely used of the oral hypoglycemic drugs.

An A.M.A. staff lawyer said in a memorandum dated March 18 that the "policy of the A.M.A. is that the association's name may not be used for trade purposes."

"Permission to reprint A.M.A. materials has not been granted if there is any indication that the name of the association or its materials will be used in any manner that might directly or indirectly be construed as an endorsement by the A.M.A. of a particular product or manufacturer," the memo said.

The staff lawyer, Betty Jane Anderson, said that if this policy was waived, "Dr. Sammons should be cautioned that the use made of the letter by Upjohn salesmen may cause embarrassment to him personally or to the A.M.A.

COMMENT BY COMPANY

The lawyer added that "Upjohn's purpose could be better accomplished by having an article presenting the other side of the controversy published in The Journal of the American Medical Association." A notation at the bottom of the memorandum indicated that a copy of it had been sent to Dr. Sammons.

A spokesman for Upjohn, reached at the company's headquarters in Michigan, said that the A.M.A. had granted the request for use of the letter, and that copies of Dr. Sammon's letter had been given to each of the company's 1,100 salesmen. The spokesman was unable to say how frequently the letter had been used.

The warning that the Food and Drug Administration proposed requiring on the