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AMA Official Let Company Use Name

(By Stuart Auerbach)

A top official of the American Medical Association allowed drug company salesmen to use a letter from him as part of their effort to persuade doctors to continue prescribing a controversial drug that has been blamed for as many as 15,000 unnecessary deaths a year.

Dr. James H. Sammons, AMA executive vice president, gave his permission to Upjohn Co. salesmen in March despite an opinion from an AMA lawyer that it is against the association's policy to use its name for business purposes.

The letter from Sammons downplayed questions about the safety of widely prescribed anti-diabetic drugs that had been raised in the AMA's magazine, the Journal of the American Medical Association.

His letter and the opinion of AMA lawyer Betty Jane Anderson were made available to newspapers by a man who was identified himself as a former AMA employee dismissed in a staff cutback. The documents were verified by AMA officials.

In a Jan. 28 letter, Sammons warned about 400 medical society executives around the country that the Feb. 10 issue of JAMA would contain a confirmation by the Biometric Society of a 10-year study that showed that some anti-diabetic drugs, known as hypoglycemics, cause more people to die of heart disease than they save from dying of diabetes. The society is an impartial group of statisticians dealing with medical issues.

The original study, done by the University Group Diabetes Program (UGDP), was hotly contested by many diabetes specialists when it was released four years ago.

But a large number agreed with the UGDP findings, and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration last week ordered that advertising for the drugs must contain the warning that they may cause death from heart disease.

The drugs are used by an estimated 1.5 million Americans to lower their blood sugar, and represent an estimated $100 million-a-year business for the pharmaceutical industry. Upjohn sells two leading brands of the drugs—Orinase, for years the most widely prescribed oral hypoglycemic pill, and Tolinase.

Upjohn said it wanted to use Sammons' letter "as a result of the confusion from the Feb. 10 JAMA story." It would be used by Upjohn salesmen in discussions with doctors "should the subject arise."

Sammons' letter reported that an editorial in JAMA would say the drugs are probably associated with "10,000 to 15,000 unnecessary deaths" a year in the United States.

The editorial was written by Dr. Thomas C. Chalmers, dean and president of the Mt. Sinai Medical College in New York and former director of the National Institutes of Health's Clinic Center in Bethesda.

Nevertheless, Sammons wrote:

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

When Upjohn asked to distribute the letter to its salesmen, AMA attorney Anderson wrote Sammons, "The policy of the AMA is that the association's name may not be used for trade purposes.

"Permission to reprint AMA 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 be construed as an endorsement by the AMA of a particular product or manufacturer."

Later in the memo, she warned Sammons that the use of the letter of Upjohn salesmen "may cause embarrassment to him personally or to the AMA."

"Upjohn's purpose could be better accomplished by having an article presenting the other side of the controversy published in JAMA," she said.

On March 17, JAMA published a letter by Dr. M. Hubbard Jr., Upjohn's president opposing the AMA editorial and the Biometrics study, and on May 26 it published a series of letters and articles from other doctors who believe in the drugs.