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STUDENTS QUERY DRUG FIRM TIES

(By Hal Willard)

CHARLOTTESVILLE, Va.—Students at the University of Virginia Medical School embarked today on a campaign to direct attention among medical students across the country to controversial links between future doctors and the drug industry.

It was immediately apparent at a public debate today between an industry spokesman and a faculty doctor that the campaign has a long way to go in Charlottesville before it hits the road.

Some medical students led by second-year man John Wasson became concerned about the proper relationship between the medical profession and the drug industry. The group decided that the action of students at Western Reserve and Harvard universities in sending back such gifts as stethoscopes, received from drug companies, was merely a "publicity stunt" and a peripheral issue.

Their campaign plan is to stir the consciences of other medical students across the country through debates similar to the one here.

In today's debate, Dr. William O'Brien, of the faculty, and Dr. Harold L. Upjohn, of the Upjohn Co., were asked to discuss, among other things, conflict of interest, drug testing before marketing and drug company advertising.

FREE GIFTS

One question asked, "Why do drug companies give free gifts, bags, trips, drugs? Should doctors and students accept them?"

Dr. Upjohn replied: "You know why they give them. No question about it. They want doctors to be interested in prescribing their brands."

He then discussed the attitude of the times, pointing out that there should be limitations on gifts and that drug companies should not be too aggressive. "If it (the giving) is excessive, it is wrong," Dr. Upjohn said.

Dr. O'Brien replied: "Medicine is the highest paying profession and it should never get in a conflict of interest. It is definitely wrong."

He then speculated that he would be dismissed from the faculty if he accepted bottles of whisky from a student in return for A grades instead of Cs.

Dr. Upjohn said: "Well, the student could say 'Good morning' to you and maybe influence you. What the hell."

LAUGHTER AND APPLAUSE

This was greeted with laughter and applause by the estimated 300 medical students and faculty physicians who attended the debate. It also brought an interloper to the microphone, Lawrence Cranberg of the University physics department and chairman of the ethics committee of the American Association of University Professors.

"Dr. Upjohn's response is unsatisfactory and rather frivolous," Cranberg said. He then discussed the evils of drug industry hospitality suites at conventions and sat down to dead silence.

But the major issue of the debate was on conflict of interest. Coincidentally, a notice on the bulletin board a few steps down the hall from the debate instructs students on how to obtain free drugs for themselves and family members living with them from company representatives. Students are told to instruct a physician writing a prescription to note the name of the preferred drug company on the prescription.

In a discussion after the debate, several medical students said they never thought of the bulletin board notice as part of the conflict question. They included some of the group that plans to mimeograph a transcript of today's debate and send it to other medical schools in an effort to inspire similar action.

Meanwhile, Professor Cranberg of the ethics committee expressed "indignation at the reaction of the students to Dr. Upjohn's cynicism."