

Letter sent to deans

English version

Dear <name of dean>

on behalf of the working group on Conflicts of Interest of the student initiative Universities Allied for Essential Medicines (UAEM) and the German Medical Students' Association (bvmd), we would like to invite you and your faculty to participate in our "Study on the Regulation of Conflicts of Interest at Medical Schools in Germany" .

Cooperation with industry plays an important role in many areas of medicine. Early in their studies, prospective doctors also come into contact with actors from industry, especially from the pharmaceutical industry. The education of students within the medical course lays out important foundations for handling public-industry cooperations and adequately preventing conflicts of interest. This is why medical schools have a key position in protecting medical students from undue influence by industry-led interest groups.

The aim of the study is to determine which measures to avoid conflicts of interest have been implemented at the 38 German medical schools. We will evaluate existing policies, considering 13 categories based on previous studies (Scheffer et al. 2017, Carlat et al. 2016, Shnier et al. 2013, Mason et al. 2011) for dealing with conflicts of interest, e.g. the categories "Gifts from Industry", "Consulting Relationships" or "Disclosure of Conflicts of Interest". We will also use defined criteria to assess the strength of the policies and their implementation. Please find all details on the categories and evaluation criteria following the link below:

<http://t1p.de/bewertungskriterien-interessenkonflikte>

In order to take the policies of your school into account for the study, we kindly ask you to send us any form of policy (or parts of a policy) with regard to dealing with conflicts of interest. Additionally, we ask you to also include information on the scope and measures to enforce these policies, as well as information on any teaching content in the curriculum of your medical school addressing conflicts of interest.

As part of the analysis, the policies of all medical schools in Germany are compared with each other, as well as internationally with policies of medical schools in countries in which similar studies have already been carried out. The results of our study will be submitted for scientific publication.

The study is supported by Prof. Dr. David Klemperer (Drug Commission of the German Medical Association, author „Interessenkonflikte in der Medizin“) and Dr. Christiane Fischer (German Ethics Council, Managing Director of MEZIS e.V.).

With our study we want to contribute to the constructive discourse on dealing with conflicts of interest in medicine. We look forward to your response and are available should you have any further questions.

Best regards,

Universities Allied for Essential Medicines (UAEM) Europe e.V. and German Medical Students' Association (Bundesvertretung der Medizinstudierenden in Deutschland e.V., bvmd)

Statement of Motivation

In order to define conflicts of interest, we use the 2010 AWMF definition:

»Conflicts of interest are defined as conditions, which create a risk for professional judgment or action, relating to a primary interest being inappropriately influenced by a secondary interest.«

Our primary interest is the wellbeing of the patient or the general public, which also includes high-quality medical education. Secondary interests include the self-interests of individual doctors, specialist groups, etc.. A distinction can be made here between material and non-material secondary interests: material conflicts of interest can arise, for example, by accepting gifts, fees or other benefits from pharmaceutical companies. Examples of non-material conflicts of interest include the desire for recognition or a professional career.

It is important to consider that conflicts of interest will inevitably arise from the coexistence of primary and secondary interests at most medical facilities. The existence of a conflict of interest should generally be regarded as neutral. Conflicts of interest cannot be avoided at the intersection between the industrial and the public sector. Universities are part of these intersections and cooperation between faculties and industry are an integral part of everyday university life. Therefore, we do not perceive e.g. industry sponsoring as negative per se. It should be noted, however, that independent, high-quality education and training on the one hand, and marketing interests of industrial partners on the other are not compatible. Prevention of inappropriate influence, for example through appropriate regulations, must be attempted. Inappropriate influence, which can result in distorted judgment and action ("bias"), is usually not perceived as such and thus happens subconsciously. The disclosure of conflicts of interest is therefore a necessary and decisive first step in the reduction and prevention of conflicts of interest and in preventing their harmful consequences respectively.

While transparency and regulations regarding connections to industry are increasingly demanded and implemented in the research context in Germany, comparable efforts within the framework of basic medical training are missing (Lieb and Koch 2014): Until now, there has hardly been any reflection regarding contacts with industry and potentially arising conflicts of interest in university training. As the period in life in which medical studies are pursued is a highly personality-shaping and career-shaping phase, it offers a lot of potential for influencing students through third parties. In order to best prepare students in professionally dealing with conflicts of interest in public-industry cooperation, it is therefore essential to address students during their studies and for teachers to act as role models in this regard.

With this in mind, we are conducting a “Study on Conflicts of Interest Policies at Medical Schools in Germany”, which intends to show the measures currently controlling conflicts of interest.

Working Group on Conflicts of Interest

Universities Allied for Essential Medicines (UAEM) Europe e.V.

German Medical Students' Association (Bundesvertretung der Medizinstudierenden in Deutschland e.V., bvmd)