

HEALTH PROFESSIONALS v SERVIER

Alleged sponsorship of a meeting

Two health professionals separately complained about a weekend meeting which they alleged had been sponsored by Servier. The meeting, of a learned society, took place within the grounds of Windsor Castle. The complainants both provided a copy of a letter and its attachments sent to Servier from the organisers, asking for sponsorship.

Both complainants referred to Windsor Castle as a 'luxurious venue' and considered more suitable professional venues were available locally. The complainants noted that although the meeting programme ran from Friday to Sunday, all education was finalised by lunchtime on the Saturday; they both noted that the programme stated that delegates could 'enjoy the rest of their weekend'.

The complainants stated that public perception of the industry and of health professionals would be extremely poor; both referred to sleaze.

The details response from Servier is given below.

The Panel noted that the complainants had each provided a request for sponsorship form apparently completed and naming a person at Servier with his/her contact details indicating sponsorship for a morning session and that artwork accompanied the sponsorship form to show a logo to be displayed between speakers' slides. Nonetheless, the Panel noted that the complainants had not provided any evidence that Servier had sponsored the meeting.

The Panel noted Servier's submission that it had not sponsored any part of the meeting and no-one from the company had attended it. A response to the organiser's request for sponsorship clearly stated that the company was unable to support the meeting because to do so at the venue in question would expose the company 'to a high degree of risk'. Servier also declined a further request to sponsor the dinner before the meeting. No breach of the Code was ruled.

Two contactable health professionals, an anonymous 'concerned oncologist' (Case AUTH/3022/2/18) and an oncologist specialising in gastro-intestinal (GI) tumours who wanted to maintain his/her anonymity (Case AUTH/3023/2/18), complained about the alleged sponsorship by Servier Laboratories Limited of a learned society weekend meeting which took place in October 2017 within the grounds of Windsor Castle. The complainants both provided a copy of a letter sent to Servier from the meeting organisers, asking for sponsorship.

Case AUTH/3022/2/18

COMPLAINT

The complainant stated that the organiser had invited Servier to sponsor the meeting which was to be held at a luxurious venue ie Windsor Castle. The complainant stated that the meeting could have been held at one of many other suitable professional venues locally. The complainant considered that a failure to maintain high standards and the elitist attitude did not reflect well on the NHS or Servier.

The complainant stated that from the programme the meeting appeared to start on Friday and end on Sunday. Closer scrutiny, however, revealed that there was some education on the Friday followed by a social event and a dinner. All education was completed by Saturday, after 1pm and the programme encouraged 'delegates either to stay and enjoy the rest of their weekend or return home'. In effect, by sponsoring this event Servier had used the high class, luxury venue as an excuse for attracting attendance. This sleazy behaviour brought both health professionals and the industry into disrepute; the public would see the relationship between the pharmaceutical industry and the NHS as one of excess, outright arrogance, and not about the science or care of the patient. The complainant stated that if such details were to get out to the media, health professionals would hang their heads in shame.

Overall, the complainant did not believe Servier should have become star struck by the venue and should have noted that the meeting was not about science and research, but about having a weekend at Windsor Castle, wine and dined by the pharmaceutical industry; this meeting was organised by an elitist for the elite.

Case AUTH/3023/2/18

COMPLAINT

The complainant alleged that Servier had sponsored the meeting in question. The complainant considered that, of all the venues around Windsor and the surrounding M4 corridor, the venue was luxurious and distracted from the main purpose of the meeting which was to discuss research in an important solid tumour type. A more professional venue would have meant sincere attendees; Servier should have adopted due diligence to ensure that the venues it sponsored were professional and not elitist or appealing to a certain class of health professional.

The complainant noted that the educational content was complete by 1pm on the second day of the three day meeting. The complainant queried whether Servier had thus effectively paid for an elitist group of doctors to get together at a luxurious venue (effectively the Queen's backyard) and spend most of their time at a social event and a banquet. The

programme stated 'delegates are free to enjoy the rest of their weekend' in return for a bit of education.

The complainant did not consider that Servier should have sponsored the meeting as it did not meet the high standards expected and the venue and social aspects (ie the social event mentioned, the luxury dinner and the amount of free time to explore the grounds) all pointed to elitism, demonstrated by a group of health professionals who could have held the meeting at a hotel nearby.

The complainant stated that he/she valued the relationship with pharmaceutical companies but considered that if this was to be made public, all parties would hang their heads in shame. The public's perception of health professionals getting together in Windsor Castle to discuss the serious topic of GI cancers at a meeting where a huge proportion of time was dedicated to a social event and a free weekend of fun, pointed to non-seriousness, sleaze and a lack of respect for patients and the hardworking jobbing oncologists who had not had a pay rise in years! The complainant asked the Authority to ensure that Servier did not put its own reputation or the reputation of working oncologists into disrepute.

When writing to Servier about both cases attention was drawn to the requirements of Clauses 2, 9.1, 22.1 and 22.2 of the Code.

RESPONSE

Servier strongly denied the allegations and considered that the complainants had misled the Authority by suggesting that it had collaborated with the NHS to sponsor such an event. The complainants had not supplied any evidence that the company had supported the meeting; they had only provided a request for sponsorship form addressed to Servier.

Servier stated that it placed the highest value on being an ethical pharmaceutical company and regarded adherence to the Code with the utmost importance. Equally it considered that it was important to appropriately support the development and education of health professionals.

Servier noted that it initially received a request to support the meeting in November 2016. Given the international standing of the organisation and the scientific merit of the meeting to the research community and ultimately patients, Servier wanted to ensure that it knew all the facts about the meeting and venue before it agreed to sponsor the event. This involved a face-to-face meeting between two senior managers and the organisers (two NHS clinicians) as well as requests for information. Servier noted that it was concerned about the venue given the availability of other business venues nearby and the possibility that the choice of venue could be misconstrued. On careful review of all information available, Servier decided not to support the meeting either financially or by any Servier presence at the meeting (in the audience or by a stand). Copies of relevant correspondence were provided.

Servier therefore considered that it had followed the correct processes for the support and hospitality of meetings, it had maintained high standards and had not discredited the industry. The company, therefore, did not consider it had breached the Code.

PANEL RULING

The Panel noted that the complainants had each provided a request for sponsorship form apparently completed and naming a person at Servier with his/her contact details indicating sponsorship for a morning session and that artwork accompanied the sponsorship form to show a logo between speaker slides. Nonetheless, the Panel noted that the complainants had not provided any evidence that Servier had proceeded to sponsor the meeting.

The Panel noted Servier's submission that it had not sponsored the meeting either in whole or in part and no-one from the company had attended the meeting. A response to the organiser's request for sponsorship clearly stated that the company was unable to support the meeting because to do so at the venue in question would expose the company 'to a high degree of risk'. Servier also declined a further request to sponsor the dinner before the meeting. The Panel ruled no breach of Clauses 2, 9.1, 22.1 and 22.2 of the Code.

Complaint received **23 February 2018**

Case completed **10 April 2018**