



A question of public trust

→ Kathy Redmond ■ EDITOR

Recent headlines in the UK press have again put the issue of pharmaceutical company sponsorship of cancer initiatives under the spotlight, rekindling the debate about its dangers and its merits. Whenever a non-profit advocacy, patient or professional group opens itself up to accusations that it is acting as a front for a commercial company, all groups and all companies find themselves under suspicion. But there are many reasons to resist a knee-jerk reaction on either side to pull back from any form of cooperation.

Pharmaceutical companies are in the cancer business to make money. And yet as long as we need better drugs to address existing unmet need in cancer, their interests overlap with many non-profit groups. Commercial firms have a long tradition of supporting advocacy groups and campaigns, some of which have had a sustained impact on the quality of care that cancer patients receive. These campaigns can benefit from the industry's resources and experience in research, marketing and communications as well as financial support. But they can also open themselves up to accusations of bias and hidden agendas, which can backfire badly on the campaign.

Some voices in this debate argue that it is impossible to prove there is no hidden agenda, and that any form of partnership with commercial interests fatally compromises the independence of non-profit

groups. But independence is of little use without the resources to run a democratic organisation that can make an impact where it matters.

In an ideal world, all the stakeholders active in the cancer arena should be able to work constructively towards shared goals, while acknowledging areas of conflicting interests. The challenge is to define how the corporate world can work with the non-profit world without undermining the reputation of all involved.

It may be impossible ever to allay the suspicions of hardline sceptics, but public confidence in general may be satisfied with answers to the following questions: which commercial concerns are contributing what, and what are they getting in return? Who decides on the agenda and the way it is pursued, and to whom are they accountable?

Many non-profit cancer groups are now negotiating a more arm's length relationship with their industry sponsors, developing policies that clearly spell out the rules of engagement. Many companies and industry associations are going through similar exercises. Some voices have long been calling for a single, simple set of agreed standards to protect those who follow best practice from being tainted by those who do not. There are many obstacles to achieving such a goal, but given what is at stake, it is important that all stakeholders take a fresh look at the way forward. Otherwise, a build up of negative headlines could prompt politicians to take unilateral action.