

NFTHD #25: Sponsoring educational events where the venue is 'questionable'

In this Notes from the Help Desk, we explore what happens when an independent event seeks sponsorship, but the chosen venue falls outside what would typically be considered appropriate.

One such event seeking industry sponsorship was being held at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG). This specialty group is known to host educational events at leisure or sporting venues, they often include entertainment or non-educational activities on their agenda, and they usually secure sponsorship from multiple companies. In reviewing the sponsorship, the company clarified with the organisers that there was no game being played at the MCG on the day, that there was to be no access to the grandstands or grounds (just access to the meeting room), that the venue had appropriate facilities to host the meeting, and so on.

The Code implies, through section 4.2(c), that a venue chosen by a third-party organiser may not always meet the same standard as one selected by a pharmaceutical company under section 4.5(a). This recognises that when sponsoring an event, companies don't always have control over the venue choice. In this instance, the company assessed the venue's appropriateness, determining that while it wasn't a venue they would personally select, it did meet their sponsorship criteria. In our discussion, we tested reasons that the specialty group may have selected this venue and we confirmed all the criteria that would satisfy our Code needs on face value. However, there was still a sense of unease about supporting an event at this location. How does this align with industry's ethical principles? Would this pass the 'pub test'?

As a self-regulating instrument, the Code is applicable to innovative pharmaceutical companies – which means it doesn't directly apply to healthcare professional groups and other third parties. However, the company in question was right to ask whether sponsoring this event in such a venue was appropriate.

In the end, we agreed that there is nothing in the Code that says they can't sponsor an event at the MCG on the basis of venue alone. The member company will be publicly report their sponsorship and the venue in an upcoming transparency report and will be open to scrutiny.

That said, it is worthwhile to have an ongoing discussion about what are we comfortable attaching our sponsorship dollars to, and whether we should uphold the standards we can accept for ourselves. More information can be found in 'Guidance on Hospitality and Venues', located in the Code Resource Toolkit.

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