

NFTHD #53: Accommodating partners (or not)

A common pickle arising from time to time: when we sponsor, or pay for, a healthcare professional to be accommodated for an educational event or meeting, what's the right approach if they want their partner to stay with them in the hotel room?

The Code in Section 4.5 clearly asserts “companies should only support the attendance of the healthcare professional who is participating in the event or providing the service to the company. It would be considered a gift or inducement if a company was to provide hospitality, travel or accommodation to spouses, relatives, guests or companions of healthcare professionals and non-healthcare professional practice staff when they are accompanying a healthcare professional”.

Based on this, it's pretty clear; accommodation should not be offered to, arranged or paid for spouses, relatives, guests or companions of a healthcare professional. Only the healthcare professional's attendance at the event, or provision of the consulting service to the company, should be supported. This translates to – don't offer the option and don't pay for additional rooms. The intent of travel arrangements is to allow reasonable time/arrangements for a healthcare professional to travel to and from an educational meeting without allowing that purpose to be blurred with leisure, sightseeing or recreational purposes. Overarching Principles behind this approach are to uphold the integrity and reputation of the industry, and ensure the independence of healthcare professionals is not compromised by receiving what could be considered a gift or inducement.

But how far do we need to go? Our role here is not to 'police' who stays in the HCP's hotel room. Rather it is to ensure the opportunities we provide are created ethically and do not facilitate, induce or enable decisions which could be considered as conflicts of interest for healthcare professionals (perceived, actual or potential).

There may be legitimate reasons for a HCP to ask that a companion stays with them, and to what extent do we really have the right to ask for their reasons and their personal circumstances? Assuming we are not spending any additional money on accommodating that companion, we haven't invited them, and we have followed the Code's principles in terms of travel, hospitality, our overarching principles of integrity, reputation and inappropriate influence, then we would suggest you use a common-sense approach to those ad-hoc requests. By moving to a principles-based Code, members are encouraged to assess your decisions through a risk-based lens. Consider what is at stake, and make a conscious decision based on the ethical principles at play.

NFTHD #53 CONTINUED...

Ultimately, if a healthcare professional has a companion stay in their hotel room, this won't throw your company into a dilemma of non-compliance. You will need to ensure that any additional accommodation costs for that companion be the responsibility of the healthcare professional and not be paid for or subsidised by your company. We would encourage companies to have clear policies and procedures in place to ensure such circumstances are addressed, but allow some scope to take a commonsense approach and not overreach. Whilst we don't want to create opportunities that encourage or easily enable the purpose of the visit to stray from its business or educational purpose; our role is not to 'police' who stays in your HCP's hotel room.

<end>