

Why Patient Attendance at Company Events Isn't Always Straightforward



Patients bring valuable perspectives, but involvement in company events must only occur in non-promotional settings.

Why companies run educational events

Pharmaceutical companies support the education of healthcare professionals through events that focus on prescription medicines. These events help doctors and other professionals learn about the latest science, how medicines work, and how to use them safely and effectively.

Pharmaceutical companies, just like any other business, are permitted by law to promote their medicines - but only to healthcare professionals. The Code requires that this promotion is accurate, evidence-based, and balanced, enabling prescribers to access up-to-date information to make informed clinical decisions in consultation with their patients. However, this means the same content, at least in that promotional setting, cannot be shared with the patient community.

Why the patient community can't always attend

The law, through the Therapeutic Goods Act, recognises only two categories of audience: **healthcare professionals** and **everyone else**. Patients and patient organisations fall into the "everyone else" group. This means it is not appropriate for patients or their representatives to attend company events that include promotional content about their prescription medicines, or that are designed to promote and inform healthcare professionals about a medicine. Allowing the patient community to attend such promotional events is effectively the same as promoting medicines to them - and therefore falls into the category of "everyone else," which is not permitted under the law.



Promotion is **broad**er than traditional advertising - it includes any talk or activity that could encourage someone to use, prescribe, or supply a medicine. Importantly, the information developed for a healthcare professional audience may not be suitable for the patient community, because the needs of each audience are different.

This doesn't mean information can't be shared with the patient community, or vice versa — that patient input can't help shape decision-making. It just needs to happen in the right, **non-promotional** setting. Medicines can be discussed with the patient community, but not in a promotional context, such as a company event designed to promote a medicine to healthcare professionals.

Patient attendance at events

Sometimes companies invite patient representatives to speak at events and share their lived experience and perspectives. These stories are **highly valued** because they help healthcare professionals, researchers, and decision-makers better understand what it's like to live with a condition. In these cases, steps can be taken to keep the setting as non-promotional as possible. This might include holding separate sessions, limiting patient access to promotional materials, or ensuring no promotional product information is visible during patient participation.

Why companies can't share medicine information like the internet can

You may wonder why patients can't hear about medicines at company events when similar information is available online. There are two main reasons:

1

First, much of the information patients find online comes from overseas - often the USA - where there are fewer restrictions on what companies can say about prescription medicines (because they can advertise directly to the public).

2

Second, content from an independent source is less likely to be considered promotional, but if a company that profits from the medicine reuses that same content, it becomes promotion.

Australia's system, set out in the *Therapeutic Goods Act*, is designed to protect patients from promotion and to prevent people from choosing prescription medicines for themselves based on advertising. Unlike online content, doctors **consider** the patient, and can explain what is safe, relevant, and appropriate for each individual. Information can be shared with patients, and their input will shape decisions, but this must happen in the right, non-promotional setting.

What about independent events like medical and scientific congresses?

There's a key difference between company events and independent events. At a company event, the pharmaceutical company often controls **everything** - the speakers, the content, and the audience. At an independent event, such as a medical congress run by a professional association, the company has no control over how it is organised.

Pharmaceutical companies often sponsor independent events because they provide valuable education for healthcare professionals, and sponsorship can also give companies an opportunity to promote their medicines to healthcare professionals, which is allowed under the law ([see Fact Sheet 3](#)).

The same rules apply at independent events as at company events: prescription medicines **cannot** be promoted to the patient community, or to anyone who is not a healthcare professional. Many event organisers also recognise that patient organisations need accurate, up-to-date information about the conditions they are managing. Depending on how an event is structured, there can be opportunities for patient representatives to participate, and event organisers usually consider ways to prevent patient representatives from being exposed to promotional content.

This isn't about shielding patient organisations from information they may already know, but about ensuring the event does not lead to complaints of breaches of the Code or the law. Organisers want companies to promote ethically and compliantly so that sponsorship of these important educational events can continue. Creating a safe and compliant environment is key to making that possible.

Ways event organisers might manage this include:

- ✓ Guiding patient representatives to non-promotional, educational sessions and limiting access to promotional areas such as product booths, branded displays, or symposia intended only for healthcare professionals.
- ✓ Using name badges, coloured lanyards, or similar tools to distinguish audiences, so company staff don't accidentally have promotional conversations with patient representatives.
- ✓ Adjusting the agenda so patient participation is focused on the most appropriate sessions.
- ✓ Ensuring only appropriately trained company staff interact with patient representatives.
- ✓ Limiting the number of patient organisations attending so the audience remains predominantly healthcare professionals, as intended.
- ✓ Creating a dedicated "consumer stream" within the conference, with tailored briefings and sessions for the patient community attending.

If it isn't appropriate for patient representatives to attend, other non-promotional educational options can be explored. Many event organisers include a consumer representative on their steering committee to consider patient involvement from the outset. Ultimately, the final decision on attendance rests with the event organiser — not the sponsoring company or Medicines Australia.

Why companies may differ in their approach

The Code sets high standards through clear principles, but it doesn't provide step-by-step rules. This means companies make their own decisions within those boundaries, including who can attend their events. For example, one company might keep healthcare professional events completely separate from patient organisations, while another might choose to hold separate non-promotional sessions involving the patient community.

Other factors also influence these decisions, such as company policies, global rules, budgets, and resources. Just like patient groups, companies vary in size and complexity. Even with these differences, the principle remains the same: patient representatives provide valuable perspectives, but their involvement in company events should only occur in non-promotional settings.