

Sullivan takes on senators, CME critics

Tom Sullivan can often be found in the trenches of the debate over physician-industry relationships, a lonely pro-industry voice squaring off against powerful legislators and ornery academics. Sullivan, founder and president of Maryland-based medical communications firm, Rockpointe Corporation, authors policymed.com, a busy blog that's become a must-read for anyone concerned with the arcane policy issues around commercial support of CME and gifts to physicians.

Sullivan doesn't shy away from criticizing the pols and med school ethics scolds he sees unfairly scapegoating the drug industry and med ed firms like his. So, it was interesting when, a few months back, figures on Rockpointe's revenues from drug companies were released by the Senate Finance Committee (the firm received \$7.2 million from pharmas in 2008). Ranking member Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-IA) is a frequent subject of Sullivan's barbs, and Rockpointe had given the figures to Special Committee on Aging chair Sen. Herb Kohl (D-WI), another top industry critic on the Hill who works closely with Grassley.

"Sullivan is awash in cash from all the major drug companies," exulted one of Sullivan's opposite numbers in the blogosphere, industry-skeptic and psychiatrist Dr. Daniel Carlat.

"One wonders why an organization that is rendering a service and hasn't done anything wrong should be subjected to this kind of scrutiny," says Michael Schwartz, who has known Sullivan for two decades and is chief of staff for Sen. Tom Coburn, MD (R-OK). "And they're not shameful numbers. There's nothing sinister about being supported by industry."

Sullivan says he's not bothered by the disclosure, noting that Rockpointe's clients support transparency and saying he and Kohl actually agree about the importance of CME funding. "That a CME company gets revenue from industry isn't news," Sullivan says, noting

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Tom Sullivan
President, Rockpointe

1995-present
Founder of Rockpointe

1987-1995
TV producer, political consultant to clients including NRCC and Rep. Dick Armey

that revenues aren't profit. "We get revenue from lots of sources. My goal is to help politicians see the value of CME to the healthcare system and to avoid actions that diminish that value. Kohl understands that physicians need to be educated and highly trained. We're on the same page there."

Last year, Sullivan helped establish the Association of Clinical Researchers and Educators (ACRE), whose pro-commercial support *raison d'être* drew a strong response from conflict-of-interest hawks.

"There's a lot of fear that there's a voice on the other side now," Sullivan says. "CME is a pawn in the attack pharmaceutical chess game."

Sullivan sees healthcare reform emphasizing the need for CME. "Imagine adding 30 million or more new patients," he says. "The system is already taxed, and there's going to be more of a need for education than ever before. Someone's got to pay for it. It's going to be tough. It'll be a reorganization of the largest sector of our economy." Everyone has a role to

play in CME funding, he says, including pharma, insurance companies, government and physicians. He finds absurd the notions that academic medicine can live without industry and that healthcare innovation will happen without financial incentive.

Before founding Rockpointe in 1995, Sullivan spent 10 years as a TV producer and political consultant. He did media outreach, grassroots organizing and ads for congressional and state political campaigns and clients including the National Republican Congressional Campaign Committee and the National Federation of Independent Business.

He also worked closely with Rep. Dick Armey's (R-TX, later a Gingrich lieutenant) campaign staff in the late 1980s. Between elections, Sullivan produced video projects for medical associations, including the ACLS series for the American Heart Association.

Though his job is challenging sometimes, Sullivan loves knowing that his programs or blogs can make a difference to the healthcare system.

"It's important not to lose sight of the fact that what we do helps patients and not to get discouraged because of critics." — *Tanya Lewis*



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