

# Patient organisations and the ABPI code

**Heather Simmonds, Director of the Prescription Medicines Code of Practice Authority (PMCPA), explores what the revised Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry's (ABPI) Code of Practice means for patient organisations**

**T**he recently revised version of the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry's (ABPI) code of practice — which the Prescription Medicines Code of Practice Authority (PMCPA) administers at arm's length from the ABPI — formalises relationships between patient organisations and the pharmaceutical industry for the first time.

## What is the code?

The *ABPI code of practice for the pharmaceutical industry* is designed to ensure a professional, responsible and ethical approach to the promotion of prescription medicines in the UK through a self-regulatory system. All member companies of the ABPI are required to adhere to the code and about 60 non-member companies have also agreed to abide by it. The code reflects UK and EU legislation, which prohibits the promotion of prescription medicines to the public, which includes patient groups.

## What does the code cover?

The code covers all aspects of the promotion of prescription medicines to UK health professionals and NHS managers, so as to prevent undue influence in prescribing. Certain non-promotional areas are also covered, including information made available to the public about prescription medicines and relations between pharmaceutical companies and patient organisations.

## Relations with patient groups

Pharmaceutical companies are

permitted under the code to interact with patient or any other user organisations, such as disability, carer, family and consumer bodies, to support their work, as long as the involvement is declared and transparent (Clause 20.3). Companies are therefore required to list all patient organisations that they support financially and must have in place a written agreement with each organisation, setting out exactly what has been agreed. In addition, materials produced that relate to diseases or medicines must be certified (formally approved by two specialists in the code on behalf of the pharmaceutical company). The code also covers hospitality (Clause 19) stating that it must only be provided at an appropriate level, in an appropriate venue and when it is secondary to the main purpose of a meeting.

In addition to the code, ABPI member companies have agreed *Guiding principles for pharmaceutical companies working with patient groups*. ABPI members have agreed to abide by these principles as well as by the code. These documents can be downloaded in full from the ABPI website.



## What is the impact?

Some of the requirements of the new code in relation to patient organisations were already covered by the previous code, or were common practice. However, they are now obligatory. Over recent months, the PMCPA, ABPI and patient groups have regularly discussed the new requirements. These discussions mainly centred around:

- Written agreements**  
 The new requirement was leading to the development of complex legalistic contracts, making some partnership arrangements unnecessarily time-consuming and costly to undertake. Depending on the project, written agreements do not have to include in full the general policies of both parties (the pharmaceutical company and patient organisation). To facilitate matters, a template for written agreements is now available from the ABPI and PMCPA websites.
- Certification**  
 There was concern that the additional workload for certifiers would lead to delays. The PMCPA and ABPI will produce guidance, which should help both certifiers and patient groups meet agreed deadlines. This guidance will be available from the ABPI and PMCPA websites in due course.

## Where next?

The new code provides clarity to standardise good practice within the pharmaceutical industry and encourage greater transparency to the benefit of patients, patient organisations, health professionals and the industry itself. As with anything new, it will take time to sort out day-to-day issues — the PMCPA and ABPI will continue to address these as they arise to ensure the code is meaningful and useful.

For more information please go to [www.pmcpa.org.uk](http://www.pmcpa.org.uk)