

Publisher consulted drug firm on journal content

From a Federal Court case in Melbourne....

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THE world's largest medical publisher asked the manufacturers of anti-inflammatory drug Vioxx which articles they wanted to include in a so-called medical journal on bone health.

Documents tendered to a Federal Court class action reveal staff at publishing company Elsevier, which produces The Lancet, emailed pharmaceutical giant Merck & Co about its "preferred content selection" for the Australasian Journal of Bone and Joint Medicine.

The publisher also admits the journal is a "single sponsored publication" where most of the content is chosen by Merck with some "input from Elsevier".

The plaintiff in the class action has alleged the journal was fake and it was simply a marketing exercise designed to promote Vioxx. The court has also heard Merck put the names of high-profile arthritis experts on the editorial board of the phoney journal without telling them they had done so.

Since these revelations, Elsevier has expressed embarrassment over its role and admitted it failed to meet its own "high standards for disclosure".

Lead plaintiff Graeme Peterson, on behalf of thousands of Australians, is suing Merck & Co and its Australian subsidiary Merck, Sharp & Dohme for compensation. He blames Vioxx for his 2003 heart attack and alleges the company covered up the increased risk of cardiovascular problems associated with the drug long before it withdrew it in September 2004.

Merck claims there is no definitive scientific proof Vioxx caused heart attacks and that it had acted responsibly.

Tendered emails between Merck Australian marketing staff and "account managers" from Elsevier Australia and Excerpta Medica Communications, a subsidiary of Elsevier, revealed the level of collusion about content in the so-called medical journal.

"It would great if I could arrange a time to come and see you early next week if possible to discuss you (sic) preferred content selection," Elsevier account manager Karina Wieland wrote on January 6, 2004.

The correspondence, tendered by lawyers for the plaintiff, also details the response to complaints by angry medical experts who had their names listed on the journal's editorial board without their knowledge or permission.

A draft letter sent to Merck staff and provisionally addressed to Professor Peter Brooks, says articles were written by Elsevier editorial staff on a topic that "is often selected by the client" and they understood if he did not want to continue being on the honorary board.

They also informed him a disclaimer would now run in the journal saying the publication was made up of company-sponsored material and the board members had not reviewed the content of the articles.