Correspondence

To the Editor—Regular perusal of the literature of one's medical specialty occasionally yields potent irony.

In the April, 1991 edition of Anesthesiology, an editorial appeared entitled "Ethics in Publishing," co-authored by the editors-in-chief of four of the world's preeminent anesthesiology journals. The views expressed in the editorial are laudable and include such issues as submission to various journals of research papers containing previously published data, use of identical control data in two papers, and violation of ethical standards involving human experimentation.

Passing reference also was made to the problem of financial conflicts of interest in publishing. Ironically, appearing within several pages of advertising copy immediately preceding this editorial is a six-page, full-color advertisement for a new agent from Glaxo Pharmaceuticals called Zofran (ondansetron HCl). This agent is touted as a "shining breakthrough for the control of emesis" (certainly an area of interest to anesthesiologists); reading on, however, one finds the qualifier "induced by cancer chemotherapy." Glancing at the "fine print" in the product summary, one confirms that this agent is approved by the Food and Drug Administration solely for the control of emesis due to such chemotherapeutic regimens. Why, then, publish such advertising in Anesthesiology?

The answer becomes apparent when one considers that, coinciding with the publication of this advertisement, Glaxo's sales representatives began "detailing" anesthesiologists, including myself, on the merits of this agent. Its cost, it should be noted, is staggering—roughly $40–50 per dose. Such expense is only justified when an agent offers an exceptional advantage over currently available therapy.

Although the latter may be true in the area of medical oncology, our specialty possesses a number of reasonably effective antiemetic agents that are useful both prophylactically and therapeutically; these agents are available at a fraction of the cost of Zofran. Moreover, as mentioned, the latter is not approved for use in perioperative nausea. One is forced, therefore, to question the ethics of accepting such advertising for a publication in a journal such as Anesthesiology—a journal unconnected with the medical specialty that addresses the sole indication for the use of this new, expensive agent. Such acceptance is clearly profit-motivated, and it also advances the apparent efforts of Glaxo Pharmaceuticals at promoting misapplication of this drug.

Robert F. Atkins, M.D.
Assistant Professor of Anesthesiology
Temple University School of Medicine
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19140

Department of Anesthesiology
Abington Memorial Hospital
Abington, Pennsylvania 19001

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In Reply—Clearly, medical journals, including Anesthesiology, are not constituted to conduct scientific peer review of or to act as a Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for advertisements. As recently stated, "An ad is an ad," and this Journal believes its readers are able to distinguish between advertisements and peer-reviewed articles. Furthermore, our faith in our readers extends to their ability to assess the cost/benefit of new drugs advertised either in the Journal or directly by sales representatives.

It is also important to note that once a drug is available for a single indication, its use may be extended into other areas. For instance, the use of ondansetron has now been reported to be effective in postsurgical nausea. These clinical extensions are important to medicine because drug companies often do not go to the expense of certifying drugs for all acceptable indications. For example, epidural use of fentanyl is not an indication approved by the FDA but is in widespread practice by anesthesiologists.