

To Faculty, Trainees, and Staff of the School of Medicine

Dear Friends:

Our new class of first-year students recently began medical school. I had the exhilarating opportunity to greet and address them on their first day. What an extraordinary group! They, like previous classes before them, are very bright, and they are also altruistic and ethical, and have high ideals, enthusiasm, and creativity. I was struck once again by how much they bring to the academic table and how untouched they are by the business of medicine. I thought about how much they will learn about medicine and academics – and not all of it directly from our curriculum, but also from us in how we conduct ourselves and make choices. I thought about how enormous our responsibility is to them and how they look to us – the faculty, chairs, and administrators – as role models. We must always remember this and conduct ourselves with that in mind. Their expectations of us to meet the highest standards of ethics, professionalism, and altruism must always be matched by our own high expectations for ourselves and each other.

We all face many complicated choices in our educational, research, and clinical activities, and one of them is how we as physicians, scientists, and educators relate to pharmaceutical and device companies. These relationships are important for advancing science and medicine and getting products to the public, but they are increasingly complicated by the way money changes hands. It is difficult to imagine progress in biomedical science without a close relationship between medicine and industry, and indeed it is mandated in the Bayh-Dole Act. Medicine and industry need this close relationship – but also need it to be untainted. Our first responsibility must be to patients, students, and the creation of new knowledge. When money enters the relationship, as it often does in our relationship with industry, we must position ourselves so that it cannot influence the objectivity of our choices and decisions as we conduct science, educate trainees, and care for patients. We must guard against conflicts of interest, and when they occur, disclose them and manage them.

Disclosure is the "letter of the law," and it is critical for us to disclose financial and other external relationships that might result in a conflict of interest, but disclosure alone sometimes is insufficient to get at the "spirit of the law." Sometimes we have to say no to the money or the activity. We must be wise in how we conduct ourselves when we interact with

pharmaceutical firms, device companies, investment companies, and their representatives.

Unbiased truth and the public trust that results are at the core of all we hold dear as an academic institution, and both are endangered when we are careless and don't pay attention. In the Medical School, wrong choices about conflicts of interest can erode the status of the whole medical profession and the trust of patients, as well as the trust of our colleagues and students. We all consider ourselves to be both ethical and compliant, but when some of our activities are viewed by outside observers, questions can arise. We must do all we can to prevent placing ourselves into questionable ethical situations that can cost a school or department or individual, and sometimes all three, significant reputational damage. We must remember that we are role models for students and residents in that they will emulate our positive and negative behaviors and characteristics.

We owe it to our students to be the role models that will allow them to grow in the presence of everyday displays of integrity, professionalism, and ethical behavior and to incorporate these standards into their own life-long choices and decisions.

Sincerely,

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Dean
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