

# ANONYMOUS v ROCHE

## MabThera symposium

An anonymous consultant rheumatologist complained that Roche had attracted delegates to a satellite symposium of a national meeting by having a celebrity (a newsreader on national television) co-chair the meeting. The complainant noted that the main attraction of a meeting should be the speakers/educational content and everything else should be secondary. The complainant further alleged that as the co-chair was a lay person they were not qualified to attend the meeting and by being there Roche had thus promoted MabThera (rituximab) to the public. The complainant considered that high standards had not been maintained and that Roche's activities had the potential to bring discredit upon the whole pharmaceutical industry.

The Panel noted that the one and a half hour symposium, attended by approximately 100 health professionals, had been co-chaired by a television newsreader. The written brief stated 'Your main responsibilities as chair are to keep a positive atmosphere during the meeting, to ensure that it runs to time and that as many delegates as possible are actively involved in the meeting'. The brief stated that the aim of the newsreader's presentation was to welcome delegates and offer a short introduction to the meeting and to discuss why it was so important to hold meetings like this. Background information on MabThera was provided with the brief. The printed materials promoting the meeting did not mention the newsreader's role. The Panel noted that the newsreader had been employed by Roche to deliver a professional service. In the Panel's view, given her role the newsreader, although not a health professional, qualified as a participant in her own right. It was thus not inappropriate for her to receive hospitality. No breach of the Code was ruled.

The Panel noted that of the ways in which potential delegates might find out about the symposium only the invitation and online registration site referred to the newsreader. The invitation included a thumbnail photograph. The flyer and the congress banner made no reference to the newsreader. Only the speaker biographies made it clear that the newsreader was the co-chair. The Panel considered that delegates had not been attracted to the meeting on the basis of there being a celebrity co-chair as alleged. No breach of the Code was ruled.

Given the newsreader's professional role as the co-chair the Panel did not consider that in these circumstances Roche had promoted MabThera to the general public as alleged. The meeting was aimed at and attended by health professionals to whom MabThera could be promoted. No breach was ruled.

**The Panel did not consider that the arrangements for the meeting were unreasonable. Roche had not failed to maintain high standards. No breach was ruled.**

An anonymous consultant rheumatologist complained about a MabThera (rituximab) symposium held by Roche Products Limited.

### COMPLAINT

The complainant stated that he attended a promotional meeting organised by Roche on 23 April 2008. The complainant noted Roche called it a symposium, but out of five presentations, most were focussed on rituximab; two even had rituximab in their title. Copies of the invitation and the speakers' biographies were provided.

The complainant was concerned that a lay person/celebrity co-chaired the meeting (this was what the biography said). Clause 19 clearly stated that only persons qualified to attend should attend meetings. Inviting a lay person/celebrity to attend/co-chair a promotional meeting and offering hospitality to such unqualified lay people (breakfast was available from 6.30am) was, in the complainant's opinion, a breach of Clause 19.

The complainant further noted that Clause 19 implied that the main attraction of a meeting should be the speakers/educational content and everything else should be secondary. Why print a picture of a lay person/celebrity on an invitation of a promotional meeting organised by a pharmaceutical company? Attracting attendees by printing a picture of the co-chair on the invitation in the complainant's opinion gave the wrong impression, was in bad taste and purely a selling exercise. The complainant alleged a breach of Clause 19. If this activity was allowed to take place, other companies would invite even bigger celebrities, give them a five minute slot, ask them to co-chair (like this person), print their pictures and attract attendees on this basis rather than the educational content!

By printing the picture of a celebrity and for the reasons cited above, the complainant alleged that Roche had failed to maintain the high standards expected from an ethical industry in breach of Clause 9.1.

This was a promotional meeting as evident from the agenda and the invitation. At least one inappropriate lay person was present at this meeting. Giving promotional messages in front of a member of the general public, the complainant believed was prohibited by the Code. A breach of

Clause 20.1 was alleged.

The complainant believed that Roche's activities had the potential of bringing discredit to the entire pharmaceutical industry and should be stopped altogether.

## RESPONSE

Roche explained that it had sponsored the meeting at issue which was a breakfast satellite symposium at the annual meeting of the British Society of Rheumatology (BSR) in Liverpool. The symposium, entitled 'Passport to RA [rheumatoid arthritis] Management', was an opportunity for the audience to hear a review of the current and future challenges in the management of refractory RA and for UK rheumatologists to have the benefit of receiving expert evaluations of potential treatment options. Roche noted the world class scientific faculty for the symposium and provided the written briefs and biographies for the scientific/medical co-chair and the other four speakers. Given the seniority of the faculty a strong and proven moderator was required to ensure that each speaker kept to both the strict timelines set out by the BSR and the overall objective of the meeting.

This was the rationale for seeking a co-chair with the capability and experience to moderate and manage this potentially challenging setting. Supplementary to this was the requirement of the co-chair to be able to initiate and manage the debate. The person contacted to perform this role was a newsreader on national television.

The newsreader co-chair was to moderate the symposium. She was contracted to attend in her professional capacity as a skilled journalist/expert facilitator/interviewer. In contrast to the other co-chair's scientific role, her main responsibilities were to introduce the meeting, to explain why it was important to 'set your sights high', maintain a positive atmosphere, probe the speakers' views and opinions and to facilitate audience participation. Her role also required her to direct and link questions to individual speaker's presentations.

The newsreader received a comprehensive written brief (provided) which was reviewed with her by Roche.

The symposium was held on 23 April at 7am, with a simple breakfast of juice, coffee, pastries and fruit, available to all attendees, including the faculty, from 6.30am. Full agenda details contained in the invitation were provided and logistical details were contained in the briefing documents which were also provided. Approximately 100 health professionals attended.

Health professionals were informed of the symposium by one of three means: a 'save-the-date' flyer, invitation and a banner in the congress centre (all provided). For further information, there was also an online registration site and speaker

biographies (both provided).

In summary, Roche believed that this was a *bona fide* forum for the exchange of scientific and educational opinion, challenge, questions and debate. Furthermore, Roche believed that all arrangements regarding the meeting were wholly appropriate.

## PANEL RULING

The Panel noted that the one and a half hour symposium, attended by approximately 100 health professionals, had been co-chaired by a television newsreader. The written brief stated 'Your main responsibilities as chair are to keep a positive atmosphere during the meeting, to ensure that it runs to time and that as many delegates as possible are actively involved in the meeting'. The brief stated that the aim of the newsreader's presentation was to welcome delegates and offer a short introduction to the meeting and to discuss why she felt it was so important to hold meetings like this. Background information on MabThera was provided with the brief. The printed materials promoting the meeting did not mention the newsreader's role. The Panel noted that the newsreader had been employed by Roche to deliver a professional service ie co-chair the meeting. In the Panel's view, given her role the newsreader, although not a health professional, qualified as a participant in her own right. It was thus not inappropriate for her to receive hospitality provided that hospitality met the requirements of the Code. No breach of Clause 19.1 was ruled.

The Panel noted that of the ways in which potential delegates might find out about the symposium (flyer, invitation, congress banner and online registration site) only the invitation and online registration site referred to the newsreader. The invitation included a thumbnail photograph. The flyer and the congress banner made no reference to the newsreader. Only the speaker biographies made it clear that the newsreader was the co-chair. The Panel considered that delegates had not been attracted to the meeting on the basis of there being a celebrity co-chair as alleged. No breach of Clause 19.1 was ruled.

Given the newsreader's professional role as the co-chair the Panel did not consider that in these circumstances Roche had promoted MabThera to the general public as alleged. The meeting was aimed at and attended by health professionals to whom MabThera could be promoted. No breach of Clause 9.1 was ruled.

The Panel did not consider that the arrangements for the meeting were unreasonable. Roche had not failed to maintain high standards. No breach of Clause 9.1 was ruled.

<b>Complaint received</b>	<b>9 May 2008</b>
<b>Case completed</b>	<b>29 May 2008</b>