Continuing Medical Education (CME) – An Important Tool to Support Positive Changes in Physician Performance and Patient Outcomes

To the Editor: S.E. Nissen’s article, “Reforming the Continuing Medical Education System,” is inaccurate and misleading.\(^1\) Research and educational outcomes data supports the value and effectiveness of continuing medical education (CME). CME is one component of the full continuum of health professional education used to make positive changes in physician performance and patient outcomes.

Nissen suggests the content of CME activities is “driven by the educator without any assessment of the true educational needs of the learner.” Rather, many CME providers are performing comprehensive surveys of physicians and other healthcare professionals to assess learning needs and how they can best be met. ACCME mandates that CME providers incorporate the educational needs underlying the professional practice gaps of learners. To ensure that this is met, a comprehensive needs assessment is required prior to the development of any educational materials.\(^2\)

Additionally, Nissen claims, “commercial sources, such as pharmaceutical and device companies, provide funding for a majority of CME offerings.” This is untrue—over the last several years, a trend toward less commercial funding has evolved. In 2013, only 17% of activities offered by ACCME-accredited providers received commercial support.\(^3\) If commercial support is received, CME providers must adhere to strict standards regarding the independence of the education from any commercial influence. A compilation of peer-reviewed studies on industry funding’s impact on industry bias demonstrated that faculty delivered unbiased education to their peers.\(^4\)
Nissen did an injustice to the CME community by not presenting all facts to readers. A July 2014 report by Cervero and Gaines concluded that CME improves physician performance and patient health outcomes. While the CME community must stay current on the best ways to evaluate and present interprofessional education opportunities, focus remains on improving physician performance and patient outcomes.

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