Guidance for scientific conferences and events in the UK

A good practice guidance document for industry personnel, patient organisations and conference organisers

December 2025 | V.02

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Introduction

This document provides a guide that should be considered in the planning and execution of congresses and events sponsored by pharmaceutical companies. This guide is specifically tailored for pharmaceutical industry personnel, patient organisations and congress organisers and its objective is to clarify the ABPI Code and help all relevant stakeholders operate in a compliant, professional and ethical manner. This is informal ABPI guidance and has been developed by ABPI member company medical directors. Any Code complaint will be dealt with by the Prescription Medicines Code of Practice Authority (PMCPA) in the usual way.

The ABPI Code reflects the UK and European legislation regarding the advertising and promotion of medicines, as well as the industry's commitment to self-regulation and transparency. The legislation prohibits advertising a prescription-only medicine to the public. The legislation also prohibits the advertising of a medicine that has not received marketing authorisation. The ABPI Code extends beyond the underlying statutory provisions and is administered by the PMCPA. This guidance also reflects recently published EFPIA congress guidance (Legal and ethical rules governing medical congress), though it should be noted that regulations in certain EU countries might be stricter in some regards.

This document is not exhaustive but intended as a guide and signpost to relevant sources of information. It covers the general principles and some specific scenarios that may arise in the context of congresses and events, such as the types of attendees, the nature of the activities and materials, the venue and hospitality, considerations for sponsorships, and social media. This guidance is intended to reflect the underlying legislation and ABPI Code, rather than set out any new rules or requirements. However, it is not a substitute for the ABPI Code itself, which should always be consulted for full details of the requirements.

General principles

The ABPI Code sets out the standards for the promotion of medicines to healthcare professionals (HCPs) and other relevant decision makers (ORDMs), as well as the provision of information to the public. The ABPI Code defines 'promotion' as any activity undertaken by a pharmaceutical company or with its authority that promotes the administration, consumption, prescription, purchase, recommendation, sale, supply or use of its medicines. This encompasses a wide range of materials and activities undertaken by a pharmaceutical company or its third parties (defined in Clause 1.24).

The ABPI Code defines 'healthcare professional' as any member of the medical, dental, pharmacy or nursing profession and any other person who in the course of their professional activities may administer, prescribe, purchase, recommend or supply a medicine. 'Other relevant decision maker' particularly includes someone in an NHS role who could in any way influence the administration, consumption, prescription, purchase, recommendation, sale, supply or use of any medicine but who is not a health professional.

The ABPI Code stipulates that promotion must be in accordance with the terms of the marketing authorisation of the medicine and not be inconsistent with its Summary of Product Characteristics. It is an established principle under the ABPI Code that, depending on the context, a product could be promoted without its name ever being mentioned.

For the purposes of this guidance, the following ABPI Code requirements are of relevance:

- A prescription-only medicine (POM) can only be promoted to HCPs and ORDMs.
- A medicine must not be promoted prior to the grant of the marketing authorisation that permits its sale or supply.
- POMs must not be advertised to the public (which includes anyone who is not an HCP/ORDM).
- Information about POMs that is made available to the public either directly or indirectly must be factual and presented in a balanced way. It must not raise unfounded hopes of successful treatment or be misleading with respect to the safety of the product.

The promotion of medicines at international meetings held in the UK may on occasion pose certain challenges regarding medicines or indications for medicines that do not have a marketing authorisation in the UK but are so authorised in another major developed country. Please refer to the ABPI Code for further information.

Congresses and events

Congresses/conferences and other scientific events/meetings ('events') represent a key opportunity for healthcare professionals, pharmaceutical companies, professional bodies and other stakeholders to come together to exchange information, advance clinical care and share best practices. These events may be national or international and organised by learned societies, professional bodies, patient organisations or other independent organisations.

Pharmaceutical companies may participate in events in various ways, such as having exhibition stands, funding and organising satellite symposia. Pharmaceutical company activities are distinct from the core scientific programme, which is exclusively managed by the independent organisation's faculty.

Pharmaceutical companies' activities at a national or international event that takes place in the UK will fall within the scope of the ABPI Code. These activities must comply with the ABPI Code and the relevant legislation, as well as the rules and policies of the event organisers.

The following sections provide some guidance on the main aspects that need to be considered when planning and executing events in the UK, such as considerations for sponsoring an event, the types of attendees/delegates, the nature of the activities and materials, the venue and hospitality, and social media. However, these are not exhaustive, and each situation must be assessed on a case-by-case basis, considering the specific circumstances and the relevant provisions of the ABPI Code.

Considerations for sponsoring an event

The ABPI Code defines sponsorship as a contribution, financial or otherwise, in whole or in part, provided by or on behalf of a company, towards an activity (including an event/meeting or material) performed, organised, created, etc. by a healthcare organisation, patient organisation or other independent organisation.

Among other things, pharmaceutical companies should review the venue, agenda, hospitality (where applicable), conference venue layout, delegate selection criteria, nature of the other exhibitors, value of sponsorship, etc., and ensure it is appropriate prior to sponsoring an event. It is an established principle of the ABPI Code that it is not acceptable for a pharmaceutical company to sponsor an activity that it could not do itself.

It is important to note that professional congress organisers can be classed as a 'third party' according to the ABPI Code. Pharmaceutical companies are responsible under the ABPI Code for the acts and omissions of their third parties that come within the scope of the Code, even if they act contrary to the instructions they have been given.

Event organisers typically seek funding from mutiple event organisers (and other relevant non-pharmaceutical companies where appropriate) rather than requesting the sponsorship of one pharmaceutical company only. A pharmaceutical company should not request or demand to be the exclusive sponsor of any activity.

Sponsorship agreements

Sponsored activities should not commence without the execution of a duly signed agreement between the parties. The agreement must be clear that when events are sponsored by pharmaceutical companies, that fact must be disclosed in all the material relating to the event and in any published proceedings. The declaration of sponsorship must be sufficiently prominent to ensure that readers are aware of it at the outset. The wording of the declaration of involvement must be unambiguous so that readers can immediately understand the extent of the pharmaceutical company's involvement and influence.

With regards to congress websites and social media posts, it must be clear from the home page/registration page/social media post that the event is sponsored by the pharmaceutical company. However, in cases where there are a very high number of sponsors, and it is not feasible to list them all on the home/registration page/body of the social media post, a clear and prominent link to a separate page listing the sponsors may be acceptable. However, it still must be clear from the outset that the sponsors include pharmaceutical companies.

The written agreement should provide comprehensive details of any benefits the pharmaceutical company will receive as a part of the sponsorship. If it is sponsorship of a patient organisation event, the written agreement must also be certified.

ABPI Code requirements can be complex, particularly regarding when pharmaceutical company sponsors may need to approve certain materials e.g. certain social media content. It is recommended to clarify requirements with sponsors in advance.

Types of attendees

A key factor that determines the appropriateness of pharmaceutical companies' activities and materials at events is the type of delegates that will have access to them. The ABPI Code distinguishes between HCPs, ORDMs, and members of the public and imposes different restrictions on the promotion of medicines to these groups.These restrictions do not generally apply to sessions, presentations, or exhibition areas which are non-promotional, that is, not considered to fall within the ABPI Code definition of promotion of POMs. At a medical or scientific congress, the scientific program may cover up to 95% of the entire program, and is exclusively managed by the medical society without any pharmaceutical industry input. It typically includes keynote lectures, debates, plenary sessions, abstract, and poster presentations. At such a congress, the vast majority of these sessions would usually be non-promotional, independent of pharmaceutical companies, and outside of the scope of the ABPI Code. However, it is a generally accepted principle that company sponsored symposia which mention company products are usually considered to be promotional activity, and therefore fall within scope of the ABPI Code.

HCPs and ORDMs are the only delegates who can be exposed to promotional content for POMs. The public, which includes anyone who is not an HCP or ORDM, must not be exposed to promotional content for POMs. As an example, conference organisers can provide different coded lanyards/badges so that non-HCP delegates do not enter promotional areas or organise two separate exhibition spaces (if any exhibitors have materials intended for the public).

It is generally accepted that there will be attendees at conferences who are not HCPs/ORDMs, but pharmaceutical companies must be confident that POMs are not promoted to the public. However, this does not generally apply to event/venue staff and those working at exhibition stands as they are not considered event delegates.

In both UK and European law, there is no distinction made between a patient and a member of the public. This means that, in most cases, all patients (including patient experts and advocates) are considered under the same compliance principles as the public. This would also apply to journalists, press and media. However whether or not a patient organisation representative is considered to be a member of the public depends on their role in the patient organisation and their particular activity. Some patient organisation representatives may qualify as ORDMs in certain contexts, for example if they work in the NHS, or have a formal role in directing and setting health policy. Similarly, medical advisors and other professionals who work with patient organisations and are qualified HCPs may receive information suitable for their HCP status.

Where healthcare undergraduate students (such as medical, pharmacy, nursing, etc) are a member of a multidisciplinary team attending a conference, it might be appropriate to include them in meetings or discussions with their health professional colleagues. Promotion of prescription only medicines to a group of medical students outside of this context is unlikely to be acceptable.

Pharmaceutical companies must ensure that their promotional and non-promotional activities and materials are clearly separated and appropriately restricted to the appropriate audience, and that they do not promote POMs to the public. Pharmaceutical companies and event organisers must consider how room layout and restricted access can assist with differentiating areas as appropriate for the audience/delegates.

Depending on the activity or materials, restricted access could include areas only accessible to HCPs/ORDMs where promotion of POMs by pharmaceutical companies can take place, for example, having different coloured badges which make it clear which delegate can be in a specific area, or scanning conference badges to allow only the appropriate audience into a specific area (these are provided an examples for consideration, and not as formal ABPI Code requirements). It may also involve providing clear signage, descriptive language, restricted access sessions or online areas to differentiate between sessions or materials for different audiences. The same consideration applies to on-demand conference promotional content.

Exhibition halls or other areas that contain promotional content should not serve as a passageway to meeting rooms or other areas that are accessible to delegates who are not HCPs/ORDMs, as these delegates may be exposed to promotional content inappropriately. Promotional materials/content must only be visible and accessible to HCPs and ORDMs.

If a conference or congress is held in a building accessible to the public not attending the event (e.g. a hotel or conference centre), care must be taken that no promotional material would be visible to these individuals to avoid inadvertent promotion.

There is specific information that pharmaceutical companies may reasonably request from the event organisers as part of its due diligence when sponsoring an event. For example, event organisers should clearly define the types of delegates that are eligible to attend the event and communicate this information to the pharmaceutical companies that are interested in sponsoring the event. Moreover, event organisers should provide information on the layout of the venue, the different areas (e.g. exhibition hall, symposia rooms, etc.) and the access restrictions for different types of delegates. It is also advisable that event organisers explain to attendees the reasons why certain sessions or materials may not be available for them to access.

Patient organisations as exhibitors

Some event organisers allow patient organisations to have exhibition stands at events. There are events with patient organisation areas that are separate from industry exhibition areas, while there are some events where exhibition halls have industry stands alongside patient organisation stands. However, patients and members of the public cannot have access to such joint exhibition areas where promotional material is displayed (e.g. promotional stands), therefore patient organisation stands in such joint exhibition areas must be aimed at HCPs/ORDMs only. In this scenario, the patient organisation representatives hosting the stand are in the exhibition hall acting solely as exhibitors and not in any other role and have a contractual relationship as an exhibitor with the event organiser. Pharmaceutical companies must not engage in promotional discussions with any such exhibitors. Representatives at pharmaceutical company stands should be briefed to ensure that the identity and role of any visitors to a promotional stand are determined before promotional information is exchanged.

The ABPI and the Patient Information Forum (PIF) have produced a handbook to support pharmaceutical companies, patients and patient organisations to work together successfully. This sourcebook has relevant information on planning events involving patients: Working together: a handbook for industry and patient organisation partnerships 2025 (abpi.org.uk).

Patients and patient organisation representatives speaking at scientific congresses

It is not necessarily unacceptable under the ABPI Code for companies to include patients or members of the public as contracted speakers at meetings where medicines are discussed – much would depend on the circumstances. It should be noted however that regulations in certain EU countries may be stricter in this regard.

When patients or patient organisation representatives are contracted as speakers at meetings where medicines are discussed, their role as service providers/consultants (i.e., they are not at the meeting as a member of the public) must be clearly distinguished from meeting delegates. Therefore, patients or patient organisation representatives must only perform the service they have been contracted for and must not be exposed to promotional content outside of the contracted engagement. This means a contracted patient or patient organisation speaker leaving the room after their speaking engagement is completed if it is a promotional meeting. However, it may be acceptable for a contracted patient or patient organisation speaker to remain in the room if they are an active presenter throughout the session, and, for example, participating in a panel or Q&A discussion.

Companies must not solicit or encourage patients/patient organisations to recommend or promote a medicine, directly or indirectly.

Nature of activities and materials

In addition to the delegates, additional key factors that determine the appropriateness of the activities and materials of pharmaceutical companies at events are the nature of the content and the purpose of the communication. The ABPI Code refers to promotional and non-promotional activities and materials and imposes different requirements and standards for each category.

Promotional stands must comply with the ABPI Code requirements for promotional materials. Companies must ensure that promotional activities are very clearly distinct from non-promotional activities. If a pharmaceutical company decides to have a promotional and non-promotional (e.g. medical information) area for HCPs/ORDMs in the exhibition hall of an event, these sections should be distinct. Non-promotional areas should not be staffed by personnel with a promotional role.

Companies should prepare comprehensive briefings for their staff who will attend the event and/or operate the stands. Staff should be briefed to always check the professional status of a delegate before engaging in a product discussion.

Pharmaceutical companies should not distribute any items (e.g. pens, pencils, notepads) from exhibition stands. Companies may provide certified company material from exhibitions stands.

Support items for HCPs to pass on to patients must not be given out from exhibition stands, however, they may be exhibited and demonstrated to HCPs and requests accepted for later delivery.

Regarding product-related activities on non-promotional stands accessible only to HCPs/ORDMs (e.g. medical information stands), companies can respond to unsolicited, specific, individual enquiries regarding a medicine (licensed or in development) from HCPs and/or ORDMs. An unsolicited enquiry is one without any prompting from the company. Responses or materials issued from such a non-promotional stand should not go beyond that needed to answer the enquiry, nor have the appearance of promotional material. Companies should design the non-promotional stand in a way that enables them to address individual questions from HCPs/ORDMs privately and avoid disclosing the discussions to delegates who did not initiate the enquiry. Companies should give consideration as to who can respond to such requests (e.g. medical information, medical science liaisons, medical advisors), as well as appropriate documentation of such requests, including pharmacovigilance reporting.

The proactive provision of information by pharmaceutical companies about the unauthorised use of a medicine ('off-label' information) or pre-licence information is very likely to be seen as promotion and in breach of the ABPI Code.

Activities regarding medicines in development/pipeline

Reactive unsolicited requests for information on pipeline products by HCPs/ORDMs can be answered on non-promotional stands. Pipeline information exhibited on stands (i.e., proactively displayed) may be deemed pre-licence promotion, which is prohibited.

Venue and hospitality

The venue and hospitality of a congress or event are also important aspects that need to be considered by pharmaceutical companies. The ABPI Code imposes certain limitations and conditions on the venue for the event and the provision of hospitality by pharmaceutical companies, to ensure that they are appropriate and conducive to the main purpose of the meeting and that they do not constitute an inducement for prescribing, supplying or administering a medicine. Event organisers must take the ABPI Code requirements into consideration regarding venue/hospitality when planning an activity for which they will seek the sponsorship of pharmaceutical companies.

The venue for the event must be suitable and convenient for the intended audience and appropriate for the scientific or educational content of the meeting. It must not be or have the perception of being lavish, extravagant or deluxe. Companies/organisers may encounter difficulties in demonstrating that five-star venues do not meet the criteria for deluxe venues – if in doubt, it may be helpful for organisers to seek guidance from one or more pharmaceutical companies that are adhering to the ABPI Code. Sponsorship opportunities for pharmaceutical companies must not include any entertainment or leisure activities, such as gala dinners, sporting events, concerts or sightseeing tours for delegates. Additionally, entertainment or leisure 'side events' that are not on the congress organisers agenda are not permitted and have the potential to undermine pharmaceutical company trust in congresses.

The ABPI Code allows the provision of hospitality at scientific meetings, promotional meetings, training, and the like and this may also be offered from an exhibition stand. Companies must be certain that the hospitality arrangements overall comply with the ABPI Code and that any hospitality provided from an exhibition stand is subsistence only and not at a level such as to induce a delegate to visit the stand. Companies may provide no more than non-alcoholic beverages, such as tea, coffee and water, and very limited quantities of sweets, biscuits or fruit. Hot dogs, ice cream, yoghurt, waffles, etc should not be provided at an exhibition stand.

Social media

The ABPI Code applies to the use of social media by pharmaceutical companies, as well as by third parties acting on their behalf or with their authority.

As social media platforms are accessible to the public, posts published by pharmaceutical companies or their third parties must not include information, directly or indirectly, about a medicine (licensed or in development). Although the ABPI Code prohibits the promotion of POMs to the public and promotion prior to marketing authorisation, it is also important to note that these prohibitions are also enshrined in legislation.

With regards to congress websites and social media posts, it must be clear from the home page/registration page/social media post that the event is sponsored by the pharmaceutical company. However, in cases where there are a very high number of sponsors, and it is not feasible to list them all on the home/registration page/body of the social media post, a clear and prominent link to a separate page listing the sponsors may be acceptable. However, it still must be clear from the outset that the sponsors include pharmaceutical companies.

Event organisers must not post any information about medicines on social media (for example, a post with a photo of a promotional symposium or promotional stand of a pharmaceutical company at the event). If the event organisers wish to share any content on social media that relates to the sponsorship of a pharmaceutical company, they should consult with the pharmaceutical company before publishing the content on social media to discuss its suitability and obtain any necessary approvals.

The PMCPA has published social media guidance to help pharmaceutical companies and their third parties apply the high standards demanded by the ABPI Code to all their online communications channels: pmcpa-social-media-guidance-2023.pdf.

Summary

Adhering to the ABPI Code of Practice is essential for maintaining trust and credibility within the industry and with the public. By following these guidelines, industry personnel, patient organisations and event organisers can ensure that their events are both informative and compliant with ethical standards. However, this document is not exhaustive, and each situation must be assessed on a case-by-case basis, considering the specific circumstances and the relevant provisions of the ABPI Code.

About the ABPI

The ABPI exists to make the UK the best place in the world to research, develop and use new medicines and vaccines.

We represent companies of all sizes who invest in discovering the medicines of the future. Our members supply cutting-edge treatments that improve and save the lives of millions of people. We work in partnership with government and the NHS so patients can get new treatments faster and the NHS can plan how much it spends on medicines.

Every day, we partner with organisations in the life sciences community and beyond to transform lives across the UK.

www.abpi.org.uk

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MA-0187-0425

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