

Your Doctor suggests you take a certain brand of drug for an injury, and later you discover she has a financial interest in the company that manufactures that drug. Your lawyer in a personal injury case suggests you seek treatment with a certain physical therapist and you discover he owns a share of the clinic where that PT practices. Your neighbor comes home with over one hundred dollars worth of vitamins that the nutritionist at the health food store recommended for the symptoms she described.

Conflicts of interest? Apparently so. Yet, when bodyworkers become distributors, direct level marketers, and promoters of products many of us give little thought to the ethical implications of recommending these products to our clients, and even involving them in a “downline” or multi-level marketing relationship.

There are many reasons to become involved in being a distributor for a product. It may be something you believe in, have experience with, and want to make available to others. However, there is often a financial interest as well, and in some cases this interest is substantial. The first ethical concern is, are you able to objectively determine if this is indeed a good product for your client if you are also profiting from their use?

I know a practitioner who was involved in vitamin and herb sales. While pregnant with her second child, she became the sole provider for her family. Using crude muscle testing as proof of their need (she had minimal training) she frequently recommended expensive supplements to her clients and then sold to them at greater than 100% mark-up. With her family’s well being at stake, the objectivity of her muscle testing and her judgment were at risk both consciously and unconsciously. She had placed herself in a very precarious position.

Bodywork practitioners are no different from other health care providers and others in the service industry. If you have a financial interest in a product or service you are suggesting to a client, the ethical course of action is to disclose that interest or to remove yourself from the position of making the recommendation. Different circumstances affect what is the proper course of action. In many cases, ethical dilemmas are not black and white. It is important to develop a thought process leading to conscious ethical behavior.

To involve a client as a participant in multi-level or distributorship arrangements is stepping into the arena of dual relationships. Like sexual feelings and sexual contact, financial involvement is a particularly large red flag. It is not recommended. The vast majority of the population has many unresolved feelings and conflicts about money. There is a great likelihood of resentments, confusion in roles, overt and covert power struggles and other sticky situations when you engage in financial investments or money making opportunities with clients.

The client/practitioner relationship is the first and most important relationship. As the practitioner, it is your ethical responsibility to shepherd this relationship in ways that will promote and care for your clients health, and to respect the responsibility and trust they have placed with you. Going into business together - however good your intentions, however careful you may be, is distracting to that relationship and risks distorting and diluting your healing work together.

Also in the arena of money, it is worth the reminder that borrowing money from clients, as well as lending money also jeopardizes the important client/practitioner relationship. If you need to make financial arrangements with a client (for example if they need to take time to pay) put the agreement in writing and include agreed upon times for repayment. If the client is late in paying, contact them right away to remind them or re negotiate the contract. Keep it clean, keep it clear, and keep it current. If you can’t afford to risk the money in for some reason they don’t pay you, don’t do it. Refer them to someone who charges less or can handle the potential loss.

Finally, keep in mind that many of these products that we are encouraged to sell come with glitzy campaigns, high pressure sales tactics, promises of financial windfalls, impressive endorsements and other attractive enticements. It is like the drug sales representatives that doctors are exposed to. How can you effectively evaluate these products in the midst of all the glamour and hype? What resources do you have available to determine effectiveness? How does the product compare to less expensive examples? What do you know about the economic, political, and ecological impact of this product? Would your involvement in this company be distracting from your work with your clients?

In summary:

- Always disclose to your clients your financial interests in services, devices, or products that you may recommend.
- Avoid having financial interests that may threaten your objectivity in making recommendations for clients.
- Do not engage in financial relationships with clients, other than the usual pay for service.
- Learn how to objectively evaluate products and the ways they are sold.

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