

Doctor says heart groups too cozy with industry

March 16 2010, By MARILYNN MARCHIONE , AP Medical Writer

(AP) -- A prominent cardiologist accused leading heart organizations of being too cozy with industry and allowing those ties to influence its policies and education programs for doctors.

Cleveland Clinic cardiology chief Dr. Steven Nissen criticized the American [Heart](#) Association and the American College of Cardiology in a speech at the college's annual scientific conference on Tuesday.

Industry influence has been a growing concern, especially its funding of education programs for doctors. Some high-profile scandals have drawn attention to a problem that some doctors believe has been exaggerated to demonize companies that take big financial risks to develop drugs.

While citing examples in his speech, though, Nissen mistakenly said the Heart Association had a financial relationship with Coca-Cola. He said that tie influenced association statements that a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages needed more study, and that the findings of a study linking soda consumption to obesity were not conclusive.

The reason for the association's stance, Nissen said, was Diet Coke's involvement in the association's red dress campaign to raise awareness of [heart disease](#) among women.

"Our societies have been bought, and it's time to draw the line," Nissen said. "When you take the money, you better accept the taint that goes with it."

Trouble is, Nissen had the wrong red dress. The campaign he cited actually was between Diet Coke and the U.S. government to promote a National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute campaign.

The Heart Association's Go Red for Women campaign also uses a red dress, but has no relationship with Coke, and the national association takes no money from the company, said the association's president, Baylor University [cardiologist](#) Dr. Clyde Yancy.

Nissen's criticism of the other group, the cardiology college, scored a hit, however. The college granted continuing medical education credits for a seminar sponsored by Merck in which an experimental Merck drug was touted. All four faculty members for the session consult for Merck.

"That is wrong. It shouldn't happen," admitted the college's chief executive officer, Dr. Jack Lewin. "We can do better than that."

The flap caused a stir at the conference and riled doctors and industry members alike. Dr. Robert Harrington, head of heart research at Duke University, who also spoke at the session, said scientists and professional societies need to do more to have "firewalls" to protect their work from corporate influence. However, most research in the United States is paid for by industry, and fair and ethical partnerships are needed to develop treatments, he said.

"While it's easy to say all of this should be funded by the NIH, that's not the reality," Harrington said.

More information: Cardiology conference: <http://www.acc.org>

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