

## There is such a thing as a free lunch?

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**TO THE EDITOR:** The 25th Australian Conference of Health Economists was held in Canberra on 2–3 October 2003.

This conference used to be held in shabby university seminar rooms, with dry biscuits and instant coffee. This year it was held in a modern facility — the SAS Visions Theatre at the National Museum — with all the usual conference embellishments, including brewed coffee and fresh pastries, plus an evening dinner at the lakeside restaurant within the museum.

The conference was sponsored by Medicines Australia; Pfizer Pty Ltd; Bristol-Myers Squibb Australia Pty Ltd; AstraZeneca Pty Ltd; Sanofi-Synthelabo Australia Pty Ltd; Schering-Plough Pty Ltd; Bayer Australia Limited; and Merck Sharp & Dohme (Aust) Pty Ltd.<sup>1</sup>

Why are those traditional sponsors of medical gatherings, the pharmaceutical companies, subsidising the health economists' conference? The immediate explanation is simple. Applications to the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee for listing of a drug on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme must now include a formal cost-effectiveness study. This requirement has generated a boom in this narrow technical aspect of health economics. Thirteen of the 32 papers presented to the conference reflected this area of interest.<sup>1</sup>

But are we seeing something more fundamental here? Are the canny pharmaceutical companies directing their largesse away from the once autonomous doctors to the dry bean counters who now make the real decisions? Or have the economists proved one of their own famous maxims wrong by demonstrating that there is such a thing as a free lunch?

1. The 25th Australian conference of health economists. Conference program and papers. Available at: [www.chere.uts.edu.au/ahes/conference.htm](http://www.chere.uts.edu.au/ahes/conference.htm) (accessed Oct 2003). □