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Drug giant forks out \$65,000 on posh nosh for doctors

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SWISS drug giant Roche has been accused of breaching the pharmaceutical industry's code of conduct by providing lavish meals to doctors at several of Australia's top restaurants.

In one case, Roche spent more than \$65,000 taking more than 200 top cancer specialists and others to dinner at the exclusive Guillaume at Bennelong, inside the Sydney Opera House. The dinner cost more than \$200 a head.

The restaurant's "degustation menu" features "basil-infused tuna", sterling caviar, kingfish sashimi and the best of Australian and French wines.

The following night, Roche funded a dinner for a select gathering of specialists at the Boathouse, another leading harbourside restaurant, with 16 people dining at a cost of more than \$2000, according to documents obtained by The Australian.

The meal featured snapper pie and nine bottles of wine, including a pinot noir worth \$85 a bottle.

At a third meal in the private function room of the expensive Aria restaurant, Roche shelled out more than \$4000 for 18 people to dine, including senior cancer doctors, some of their partners, and one child.

This meal included 13 bottles of wine, including seven bottles of 2002 Yering Station pinot noir costing \$60 a bottle.

The pharmaceutical industry's code of conduct in Australia, which is administered by the industry body Medicines Australia, states company-sponsored meals should be "simple and modest".

Confronted with detailed evidence of the meals, a Roche spokeswoman admitted funding the events in July last year but argued they were in line with the industry code.

The largesse, which will be raised in an article in today's British Medical Journal, was part of a Roche-sponsored meeting for doctors specialising in blood disorders and cancers.

The Roche spokeswoman said such dinners were organised because the "educational content was rigorous and the days were long, it seems reasonable to us that a dinner of this type was on offer at the end of such an educational day".

Karen McLeod, a former partner of one of those present, has blown the whistle on the lavish wining and dining - a practice that the industry has claimed is a thing of the past.

Ms McLeod said the doctors behaved liked naughty schoolboys. During one conversation, she claimed, they joked about how there seemed to be no limit to the price of bottles of wine that the drug company representatives would buy for them.

She told The Australian she was "disgusted by the gluttony" and that in her view doctors accepting drug company meals was wrong, particularly public hospital specialists making decisions about expensive cancer therapies. Roche's top-selling cancer drug sells for \$10,000 per course of treatment.

Based in Switzerland, Roche had annual sales last year of \$37 billion, and profits of \$7 billion. Sales of its anti-cancer drugs, including the breast cancer drug Herceptin, rose 42 per cent between 2004 and last year.

The company's top-selling drug is MabThera, for a cancer called non-Hodgkins lymphoma, which costs almost \$10,000 in Australia for four doses, and is also used "off-label" at the doctor's discretion for a range of other conditions.

The Australian Consumers Association said doctors should be held accountable when they were prescribing such high-cost drugs at taxpayers' expense, and should not accept drug company meals.

ACA spokeswoman Viola Korczak said the industry's self-regulatory code was clearly ineffective and governments should step in and regulate drug company interaction with doctors.

Peter Mansfield, from the global drug marketing watchdog Healthy Skepticism, claimed Roche had breached the industry's code requiring "simple and modest" meals, and yesterday he made a formal complaint to Medicines Australia.

After questioning other companies, Dr Mansfield is concerned none may have the capacity to enforce the code, as none have disclosed limits on what they will spend on meals.

Ian Kerridge, an ethicist at the University of Sydney, said "the cost of these events ultimately contributes to the costs of drugs, which is borne by patient directly, or indirectly, through government health budgets".

Answering detailed questions about the events, a Roche spokeswoman conceded there were two partners present.

She said the company had sought to retrieve payment for the meals from the partners. However, the company had so far been unsuccessful because of two separate divorce proceedings.

In the case of the child, the spokeswoman said a hotel babysitter for a foreign visitor was cancelled at the last minute.