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Buyer beware: Educate consumers of continuing education

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Glossy flyers from academic institutions, professional associations, and aggressive new proprietary groups daily cross the desks of professionals, announcing important and timely programs taught by important and timely instructors. How do practitioners determine who is the best provider and which can assure quality programs?

I recently attended a 3-day conference on industrial rehabilitation sponsored by entrepreneurial providers. The sponsors were nationally known for their involvement in work injury management practices. However, I soon came to realize, a familiar name does not ensure a quality continuing education experience. As the days grew on, I sensed I was attending a 3-day commercial. The sponsors set up a table of their products, obviously for sale. Throughout the entire 3-day experience, references were made to their products, practice, and literature. Upon reviewing the reference articles and the sponsors' vitae, I found none of the articles to be data based or research informed. In fact, most were commentaries published in non-refereed journals. The vitae revealed the sponsors' highest level of education to be baccalaureate degrees, with no mention of advanced knowledge or skills acquisition in industrial rehabilitation. Yet, these people very actively promoted themselves and their products as state of the art.

My concern is for uninformed practitioners who, as a result of attending such a conference, buy the provider's total 'package.' Too often providers obtain practitioners' trust and money based solely on the familiarity of their name in the field they practice. When, in fact, their name was made familiar by hiring their own protégés to provide workshops across the country using the sponsors' names and promoting their products.

The danger lies in the potential for professionals to be led by false or unsubstantiated beliefs. Let the buyer beware. Continuing education has become a free market bred by competition and financial incentives. The time has come for practitioners to be better educated on what to look for in continuing education opportunities.

Industrial rehabilitation calls for a melding of medicine, industry, insurance, and government. Given the number of players this implies, a more logical approach to the production of a high quality continuing education experience would be one of cooperation and collaboration among the parties involved. A benefit of this action is reduced costs for each provider, in comparison with single sponsorship. Another benefit is the legitimate ability to expand domains. Combining the knowledge, experience and perspectives of various professions is a powerful strategy for provok-

ing new insights and advancing the education, research, and practice in industrial rehabilitation.

Beware of the lone ranger sponsors of continuing professional education. Granted, some may legitimately possess a great deal of knowledge and expertise in a given area of practice. On the other hand, it is this type of sponsor whom also is

more apt to be biased in promoting themselves, their practice, and their products. I would hope professionals would be more concerned with contributing to the advancement of their professions and not the advancement of individuals seeking to monopolize a market.