

September 2, 2009

Harvard Backs Off Media Policy

By [DUFF WILSON](#)

Harvard Medical School is backing off a new student policy that would have restricted interaction with the news media after students complained it would chill their ability to talk about current issues in medicine, school officials said Tuesday.

“We need to be very careful,” said Dr. Nancy E. Oriol, the dean of students, who helped develop the policy. Promising it would be revised, she said the policy was intended to help students, rather than limit speech or control what they say on controversial topics.

But several students said the policy was an attempt to keep them quiet about issues like medical conflicts of interest.

“This is one of many ways that medical education implicitly teaches behaviors that differ significantly from the values that we hope physicians will uphold,” Nate Favini, a [Harvard](#) medical student and chairman of the Student Council Advisory Board, said in an e-mail message Tuesday. “Instead of limiting students, we should encourage bold thinking and allow them to advocate for the reforms that our health care system so badly needs.”

Mr. Favini and some Harvard Medical faculty said they were encouraged by the decision Tuesday to retract the policy.

“The policy was extremely ill advised,” Dr. [Marcia Angell](#), a Harvard lecturer and former editor in chief of [The New England Journal of Medicine](#), said Tuesday.

The policy says: “All interactions between students and the media should be coordinated with the Office of the Dean of Students and the Office of Public Affairs. This applies to situations in which students are contacted by the media as well as instances in which students may be seeking publicity about a student-related project or program.”

In an interview Tuesday, Dr. Oriol said, “The wording is problematic and it doesn’t really capture our intent.”

She did not deny that the policy was prompted in part by student remarks earlier this year about the influence of pharmaceutical companies on medical education. But she said, “I could give you a nice long litany of prompts.”

Other factors, Dr. Oriol said, included concern about patient privacy and the growing prevalence of [Twitter](#). But she conceded the policy applies to “the media” rather than new media like Twitter.

David Tian and Kirsten Austad, activist medical students at Harvard, said in an e-mail message Tuesday, "It is hard to imagine that this new policy is not somehow related to the past advocacy efforts of students. The reason we spoke out against conflicts of interest was to promote patient welfare as the primary concern of medicine, in the face of institutional practices that can harm patient care."

The policy was approved Feb. 2, according to a Harvard document, shortly after The New York Times interviewed Mr. Tian, Ms. Austad and other students featured in an article headlined "Patching a Wound." The policy was not circulated until last week and was added to the student handbook for the 2009-10 academic year, according to an Aug. 25 e-mail message to students and faculty, listing it among other new policies on issues from grades to student comments on professors.

"I hadn't heard about it, honestly," Brian Fuchs, a Harvard medical student who has spoken to reporters in favor of university relations with the medical industry, said Tuesday.

"It might not even be constitutional," he added. "That is a big issue, actually."

Some legal experts agreed, saying that even though the First Amendment did not apply directly to private universities like Harvard, they still had a responsibility if not a contractual obligation to allow students academic freedoms and freedom of speech.

Harvey Silverglate, a Cambridge civil rights attorney who co-founded and is chairman of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, and has challenged university restrictions on free speech, said he knew of no other such policy.

"It doesn't surprise me that the first instance I've heard of comes from Harvard, and the reason is the Harvard public affairs staff has been trying for years now with increasing success to take over communications with the outside world," he said in an interview. "It is very corporatized."

Other colleges in the Harvard system do not appear to have a restrictive policy on news media interactions, nor do the medical schools at [Yale](#), Johns Hopkins and Stanford, officials at those schools said Tuesday.

Gina Vild, associate dean for communications and external relations, wrote to Mr. Favini Tuesday and said: "We acknowledge that as currently phrased the media policy may be open to misunderstanding. We certainly will revise it and look forward to doing so with student input, ensuring that it reflects the fact that we unequivocally respect the right of students to speak out for change and explore new ideas."

Ms. Vild said in an interview that she would try to remove the policy immediately from the electronic version of the student handbook.

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