

Can Preventive Advice Remain Independent When the Pharmacy Benefits from the Recommended Purchase? Commercial Influence, Recommendation Integrity, and Trust in Health Promotion

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Abstract

Community pharmacies increasingly deliver preventive and health-promotion services while remaining retail organizations that may benefit financially from products or services recommended during the same encounter. This dual position creates an ethical problem that cannot be resolved simply by establishing that a commercial interest exists. The relevant question is whether the financial linkage creates a meaningful risk that professional judgment, presentation of alternatives, or patient-centered recommendation is displaced or distorted. This conceptual article develops a Recommendation-Integrity Framework for evaluating commercially linked preventive advice. The framework distinguishes structural commercial interest from demonstrated influence; formal professional status from practically usable independence; recommendation quality from patient trust; and transparency from stronger responses such as separation, substitution, or abstention. Evidence from community-pharmacy ethics, professionalism, work-system research, conflicts-of-interest scholarship, disclosure experiments, and trust research is used to establish the framework's normative components without treating cross-professional evidence as pharmacy-specific proof. Recommendation integrity can remain intact when evidence, patient interests, professional control, and credible alternatives govern the advice despite a financial benefit. Stronger ethical responses become warranted as commercial influence becomes more proximate to the recommendation, professional independence weakens, alternatives are obscured, or organizational safeguards cease to be practically effective.

Keywords: Community pharmacy, Preventive advice, Commercial influence, Conflict of interest, Professional independence, Recommendation integrity

Introduction

Community pharmacy places professional advice inside an organizational setting that is simultaneously clinical, public-facing, and commercial. Pharmacists may be expected to promote prevention, support self-care, identify health risks, and recommend products or services while working in businesses that earn revenue from at

least some of the resulting transactions. Qualitative research from retail pharmacy shows that commercial and managerial conditions can create genuine ethical tensions for pharmacists, including pressure surrounding sales, product promotion, and professional autonomy [1]. The ethical significance of those tensions lies in their capacity to alter the conditions under which advice is formulated or delivered, not in the mere presence of retail activity.

That tension is also experienced as a problem of role performance. Pharmacists have described the continuing effort required to reconcile healthcare professionalism with retail employment, using strategies that range from compromise and boundary management to resistance or accommodation [2]. Such findings suggest that

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commercial structure and professional judgment are neither identical nor entirely separable. A pharmacist may work within a revenue-generating organization while retaining substantial professional control, or may possess formal professional obligations while lacking sufficient practical freedom to exercise them consistently.

The question matters because community pharmacies are established venues for preventive and public-health activity. Reviews document pharmacist participation in physical-activity promotion, broader public-health interventions, and preventive services capable of extending access to care [3-5]. Accessibility, however, creates ethical responsibility as well as opportunity. When preventive advice leads toward a purchase from which the pharmacy benefits, the credibility of the recommendation depends on more than whether the service or product could plausibly benefit the patient. It also depends on how the recommendation was reached, which alternatives were considered, whether commercial conditions constrained professional judgment, and whether the patient could reasonably distinguish professional advice from sales influence.

This article therefore treats recommendation integrity as the central normative object. The purpose is not to presume that financially linked advice is biased, nor to treat disclosure as an automatic solution. The task is to identify the conditions under which commercially linked preventive recommendations remain professionally defensible and the circumstances in which disclosure, separation, substitution, abstention, or organizational safeguards become ethically necessary.

The ethical problem of benefiting from one's own recommendation

A useful starting point is the distinction between an interest and a conflict of interest. A conflict becomes ethically significant when an interest creates a meaningful risk of inappropriate influence on a duty that should be governed by another consideration [6]. Applied to preventive advice in pharmacy, the relevant duty is the professional obligation to recommend in accordance with defensible evidence, patient circumstances, available alternatives, and appropriate clinical judgment. A pharmacy's financial benefit is therefore ethically relevant because it can introduce a competing interest into that duty. Its existence alone does not establish that the recommendation has been corrupted.

This distinction prevents two opposite errors. The first is complacency: assuming that professional status neutralizes commercial influence. The second is determinism: treating every commercially beneficial recommendation as evidence of bias. Ethical analysis requires attention to the proximity and magnitude of the interest, the professional's control over the decision, the extent to which the recommendation is constrained by evidence, the visibility of alternatives, and the consequences of getting the recommendation wrong.

Evidence from other healthcare settings illustrates why this distinction matters. Industry-linked recommendations and endorsements may coincide with financial relationships that are not apparent to the recipient, while public disclosure can change what patients know or infer about those relationships [7-9]. Yet disclosure studies do not show one uniform behavioral or trust response. In a randomized field experiment, disclosure increased patient knowledge of physician-industry relationships without producing corresponding significant changes in trust or appointment behavior [8]. Nationwide transparency can likewise affect public perceptions without establishing that every disclosed relationship produced inappropriate advice [9].

The ethical problem is therefore structural before it is accusatory. A pharmacy may benefit from a preventive recommendation and still offer the recommendation for sound professional reasons. At the same time, a structure that rewards particular products, services, brands, or transaction volumes can create a standing risk that advice will become selectively framed. Recommendation integrity requires a way to evaluate that risk without collapsing it into either presumed innocence or presumed misconduct.

Sources of commercial influence in community pharmacy

Commercial influence can enter preventive advice at several points. One route is the product environment itself. Community pharmacists have described ethical tension around front-of-store sales, including concern about products that sit uneasily with healthcare identity and about the influence of commercial considerations on what is stocked, displayed, or promoted [10]. Product availability matters because recommendation choice does not occur in a neutral marketplace. A product that is visible, incentivized, heavily stocked, or organizationally prioritized may become cognitively and practically easier

to recommend even when other clinically reasonable options exist.

A second route lies in the policy and organizational environment surrounding practice. Stakeholder research indicates that pharmacist professionalism is shaped across regulatory, organizational, community, and individual levels [11]. The ethical quality of a recommendation may therefore depend partly on whether organizational policies reinforce independent judgment or make that judgment costly to exercise. Formal professional standards can coexist with local targets, workflow expectations, commercial campaigns, performance measures, or managerial practices that shift the practical balance between patient-centered advice and organizational priorities.

Professionalism research reinforces the need to avoid a single-cause account. A scoping review of community-pharmacy professionalism identified interacting technical, attitudinal, administrative, and policy influences rather than a solitary determinant of professional behavior [12]. Commercial pressure may therefore explain some recommendation vulnerabilities while workload, inadequate staffing, limited training, policy ambiguity, or weak professional support explain others. An integrity framework must discriminate among these causes because the appropriate ethical response differs depending on what is actually constraining professional judgment.

Evidence from community-pharmacy ethics also suggests that organizational pressure and professional conduct can become linked in practice. A mixed-methods study in Nigeria identified problematic ethical behaviors alongside managerial, sales-related, and regulatory influences, while also finding patterns consistent with the protective role of professional-code engagement [13]. Such findings cannot be transferred as prevalence estimates across jurisdictions, but they show why sales pressure should be treated as an organizational variable rather than solely as a personal moral failing.

Financial incentives themselves also require careful interpretation. Experimental evidence from physicians indicates that responses to financial incentives vary with motivations and practice characteristics [14]. The implication for community pharmacy is conceptual rather than numerical: a commercial benefit may alter behavior for some professionals or under some organizational conditions without determining behavior in every case. Recommendation integrity must therefore evaluate the route through which commercial benefit reaches the recommendation rather than treating financial interest as a complete explanation.

Commercial influence becomes ethically consequential through different entry points in the recommendation process, each altering the conditions for professional judgment in a different way. **Table 1** distinguishes these entry points while preserving the possibility that professional independence remains intact.

Table 1. Commercial-linkage states and their distinct implications for preventive recommendation integrity

Commercial-linkage state	Point of entry into the recommendation encounter	Effect on practical professional independence	Status of patient alternatives	Condition that makes the influence ethically material	What prevents commercial benefit alone from proving compromised integrity
Revenue from an otherwise evidence-supported product or service	Benefit arises after a recommendation that could independently be justified	Independence may remain high if product choice is professionally controlled	Comparable alternatives remain visible and discussable	Revenue begins to shape which option is presented, emphasized, or omitted	Clinical appropriateness and transparent comparison can remain independent of the sale
Product-selection or stocking pressure	Commercial priorities shape what is readily available or promoted before the encounter	Independence narrows when professional choice is constrained by inventory or promotion	Alternatives may be practically available but less visible	Organizational selection makes commercial availability substitute for comparative	Restricted assortment does not establish that the available option is inappropriate

				professional judgment	
Recommendation-sensitive sales target or incentive	Financial or performance reward is linked to recommending a particular option or transaction	Independence is vulnerable because organizational reward is contingent on advice	Alternatives may compete directly with the rewarded option	The incentive affects framing, frequency, urgency, brand choice, or omission of substitutes	Incentives can be resisted or rendered irrelevant when evidence strongly constrains the appropriate recommendation
Managerial or cultural expectation to convert advice into sales	Influence enters through supervision, performance norms, or workplace culture	Formal autonomy may coexist with low usable autonomy	Alternatives may be technically available but professionally costly to recommend	Exercising independent judgment creates employment, evaluation, or relational penalties	Managerial expectations vary in force and may coexist with strong professional safeguards
Commercially designed preventive campaign	Organizational messaging frames the problem and preferred solution before patient assessment	Independence depends on latitude to depart from campaign scripts or preferred products	Alternatives depend on campaign design and pharmacist discretion	Standardized commercial framing displaces individualized assessment	Campaign participation can remain ethical where content is evidence-based, alternatives are preserved, and pharmacists retain discretion
Retail setting without recommendation-specific commercial pressure	The pharmacy benefits generally from transactions but no particular option is rewarded	Practical independence may remain substantial	Alternatives can be presented normally	General commercial context becomes relevant only if it materially influences advice	Organizational revenue dependence is too remote, by itself, to establish compromised recommendation integrity

Professional independence and recommendation integrity

Recommendation integrity requires more than professional credentials or legal authority. Research on pharmacist autonomy shows that formal professional status can coexist with substantial practical constraints created by employment dependence, market control, organizational hierarchy, or workplace expectations [15]. The ethically relevant question is therefore whether the pharmacist can actually exercise professional judgment in the encounter. Independence is practical when the pharmacist can modify, refuse, qualify, redirect, or withhold a commercially beneficial recommendation without facing conditions that predictably make such professional action unusable.

Professionalism research helps locate independence within a wider professional identity. Survey work using a multidimensional professionalism instrument has

treated autonomy, self-regulation, altruism, commitment, and related domains as separable components of professional orientation [16]. These dimensions are useful conceptually, but they should not be mistaken for direct measures of recommendation integrity. A pharmacist may score highly on professional attitudes and still encounter an organizational arrangement that restricts what can be recommended. Conversely, commercially situated practice does not imply an absence of professionalism.

Ethical reasoning capacity also matters. Moral case deliberation with community pharmacists has shown that structured discussion can deepen moral reflection and, for some participants, alter the position ultimately taken on an ethical problem [17]. Reflective capacity is therefore a plausible protective resource when commercial and professional considerations collide. Its limits are equally important. Reflection cannot

compensate for a system in which the pharmacist lacks time, decision rights, access to alternatives, or permission to act on the conclusion reached.

The broader ethics literature in community pharmacy confirms that dilemmas are part of ordinary practice rather than exceptional events [18]. Moral distress research likewise shows that pharmacists may recognize what they regard as the preferable professional action while experiencing constraints that make that action difficult to perform [19]. These observations help distinguish two failures that are often conflated: a failure of judgment and a failure of enactment. A pharmacist may reach an ethically and clinically defensible conclusion yet be unable to implement it under prevailing organizational conditions.

Role-theory evidence adds another important qualification. Community pharmacists experience role conflict, ambiguity, overload, and other work-related tensions that are not reducible to commercial influence [20]. If a rushed or poorly individualized recommendation occurs, commercial benefit is only one possible explanation. Workload, fragmented responsibilities, insufficient staffing, uncertainty about role expectations, and time pressure may produce similar observable behavior. Recommendation integrity therefore requires causal discipline: concern should be directed toward the conditions that actually shape the recommendation, not merely toward the most morally salient feature of the setting.

Professional independence in this framework is accordingly defined as the practically usable capacity to let defensible patient-centered reasons govern the recommendation. Recommendation integrity is the resulting quality of the recommendation process: the advice remains grounded in appropriate evidence and patient circumstances, alternatives are handled fairly, and commercial considerations do not improperly determine what the patient is urged to do.

Trust as an ethical outcome

Trust matters because preventive advice often asks patients to rely on professional expertise that they cannot fully verify at the point of decision. Commercial linkage can therefore have consequences even when the recommended product or service is clinically appropriate. Experimental evidence shows that information about substantial industry payments can reduce some dimensions of perceived physician trustworthiness, including perceived honesty or fidelity,

while other trust comparisons remain unchanged [21]. Trust responses are therefore selective rather than automatic.

Public trust is also sensitive to the wider recommendation environment. National survey evidence indicates that perceived conflict among health experts is associated with lower trust in health experts and agencies [22]. Applied cautiously to pharmacy, this suggests that inconsistent or visibly commercially aligned recommendations can affect credibility even before a patient can determine whether any particular recommendation was substantively wrong.

Trust should nevertheless remain analytically separate from recommendation integrity. A critical review of patient-physician trust identifies multiple contributors at patient, clinician, relational, and system levels [23]. A patient can distrust a professionally sound recommendation, and a patient can trust advice that is commercially distorted. Trust is therefore an ethically important consequence and relational resource, not a substitute measure for determining whether the recommendation itself was independently justified.

For community pharmacy, the objective is consequently not to maximize trust at any cost. The stronger objective is trustworthiness: organizing recommendation practice so that confidence, where it exists, has defensible grounds. This requires visible professional independence, fair treatment of alternatives, proportionate transparency where commercial interests are relevant, and organizational arrangements capable of supporting the pharmacist when commercial and professional considerations diverge.

Normative principles

The first normative principle is relevance-sensitive transparency. Commercial relationships should be disclosed when they are sufficiently connected to the recommendation to matter to a reasonable patient's assessment of the advice. Contemporary conflict-of-interest guidance emphasizes systematic identification and reporting of relevant financial relationships [24]. Transparency, however, concerns the patient's access to information about the interest; it does not by itself determine whether the underlying influence has been controlled.

The second principle is proportionality of response. Evidence across clinical guidelines, advisory reports, opinion pieces, and narrative reviews indicates that financial conflicts of interest are associated with more

favourable recommendations in several settings [25]. This supports ethical caution, but it does not justify treating every financially linked recommendation as invalid. The strength of the response should correspond to the seriousness of the unresolved integrity risk.

A third principle follows from professional duty: independent justificatory sufficiency. A recommendation that benefits the pharmacy should be capable of being defended without relying on that benefit. The recommendation should remain intelligible as a professional judgment if the commercial advantage is analytically removed from the case. Where the advice cannot be defended on evidence, patient circumstances, and fair consideration of alternatives, disclosure does not rescue the underlying recommendation.

The fourth principle is fair treatment of alternatives. Integrity weakens when commercially preferred options receive systematically more favorable presentation while reasonable substitutes, non-purchase options, referral pathways, or watchful waiting are obscured. Fairness does not require presenting every conceivable alternative. It requires that commercially inconvenient but professionally material options are not suppressed.

The fifth principle is organizational non-obstruction. A pharmacy should not claim to rely on independent professional judgment while maintaining conditions that make such judgment impracticable. The ethical status of an individual recommendation is partly shaped by whether pharmacists possess usable discretion, adequate time, access to relevant information, and permission to diverge from commercial preferences when professional reasons require it.

Together, these principles establish the evaluative basis for a recommendation-integrity account without predetermining one universal remedy. The appropriate response depends on the configuration of commercial interest, professional independence, evidence, alternatives, patient dependence, and organizational safeguards.

Development of the recommendation-integrity framework

The Recommendation-Integrity Framework treats commercially linked preventive advice as a configurational ethical problem. No single variable decides the case. A financial interest may be present without producing inappropriate influence; professional independence may be formally recognized while practically constrained; a recommendation may be

clinically appropriate while its presentation suppresses alternatives; and a disclosure may be complete while the underlying decision process remains commercially structured.

Work-system research provides an important organizational foundation for this approach. Observation and interview research in community pharmacy shows that features of the work system can create the need for, facilitate, or inhibit pharmacists' enactment of non-technical professional skills [26]. Recommendation integrity should therefore be evaluated at both the encounter and organizational levels. The pharmacist's reasoning matters, but so do the conditions that determine whether that reasoning can govern action.

The framework begins with the commercial-interest condition: what benefit exists, how closely it is linked to the specific recommendation, and whether organizational rewards vary with the choice made. A remote organizational interest creates a different ethical problem from a recommendation-sensitive sales target. This distinction preserves the risk-based account of conflict of interest while avoiding the inference that any financial connection proves compromised judgment [6].

The second component is practically usable professional independence. The question is whether the pharmacist retains meaningful authority to depart from commercially preferred options, alter the recommendation, offer a substitute, advise against purchase, or decline to recommend when professional reasons require it. Evidence on retail-pharmacy autonomy demonstrates why formal professional standing cannot answer this question on its own [15].

The third component is the recommendation context. Integrity is more readily preserved when evidence strongly favors a particular option, patient-specific circumstances support it, and reasonable alternatives have been fairly considered. The ethical concern intensifies as evidence becomes contestable, several substitutes are similarly defensible, or commercial advantage tracks one option more closely than the others. Under those conditions, the recommendation itself becomes a more sensitive site for possible influence.

The fourth component concerns patient alternatives and dependence. A recommendation has different ethical stakes when the patient can easily compare options, defer the decision, or seek independent advice than when the patient is relying heavily on the pharmacist's expertise, faces health-literacy barriers, or is unaware that non-purchase alternatives exist. The same commercial

linkage may therefore justify different protections in different encounters.

The fifth component is trust and trustworthiness. The framework does not equate a patient's trust response with proof of ethical quality. Trust research shows that confidence is multidimensional and influenced by relational and system factors beyond the underlying recommendation [23]. The framework instead asks whether the recommendation arrangement supplies adequate grounds for justified trust: independence is real rather than ceremonial, commercially inconvenient options can be raised, and relevant interests are not concealed.

The final component is organizational safeguard capacity. Individual integrity is fragile when it depends entirely on personal resistance to commercial pressure. A defensible system should make appropriate recommendation behavior feasible through organizational design, professional discretion, reviewable policies, accessible alternatives, and escalation routes. These safeguards do not eliminate the need for individual ethical judgment; they determine whether such judgment can be exercised reliably.

The framework therefore distinguishes four ethically separate questions within a commercially linked recommendation: whether a relevant financial interest exists; whether that interest can practically influence professional judgment; whether the recommendation remains independently justifiable and alternatives are treated fairly; and whether the residual risk requires a response beyond ordinary professional practice. The response itself is deferred to the next section because disclosure, separation, substitution, and abstention address different integrity problems and should not be collapsed into a single hierarchy.

Figure 1 represents this configurational logic. Commercial interest enters as a potential source of pressure rather than a presumption of bias; recommendation context and professional independence shape whether that pressure can alter advice; patient alternatives and dependence affect ethical stakes; trust is represented as a consequence of the arrangement rather than proof of recommendation quality; and organizational and regulatory conditions can constrain or protect the integrity of the encounter.

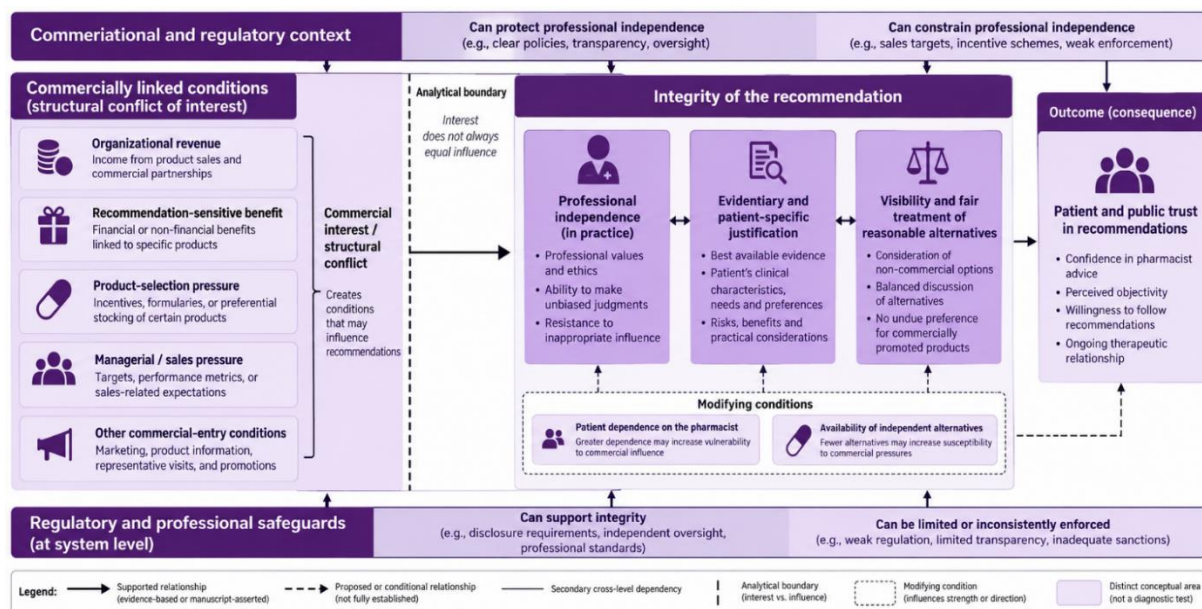


Figure 1. Recommendation integrity under commercially linked preventive advice: interaction of commercial interest, professional independence, recommendation conditions, patient alternatives, trust, and safeguards

Disclosure, separation, substitution and abstention options

The appropriate ethical response to commercial linkage depends on what remains unresolved after the

recommendation has been assessed for independent justification, fair treatment of alternatives, and practical professional independence. Disclosure addresses informational asymmetry. It is most defensible when a

relevant commercial interest exists but the pharmacist retains control of the recommendation and the advice can be independently justified. Evidence that disclosure can improve awareness without consistently changing trust or behavior cautions against presenting transparency as a complete remedy [8]. Payment-disclosure experiments likewise show that responses depend on the magnitude and meaning patients attach to the disclosed relationship [21]. Systematic conflict-of-interest reporting therefore remains important [24], but disclosure should not be used to legitimize a recommendation process whose substantive independence has already been compromised.

Separation addresses a different problem: control. Where commercial responsibilities, sales incentives, or managerial expectations materially constrain the same professional who determines the recommendation, separating the commercial function from recommendation authority may protect independence more effectively than disclosure. The justification follows from the risk-based conception of conflict of interest: the ethical concern is the capacity of an interest to inappropriately influence a duty [6]. Separation is therefore unnecessary merely because the organization earns revenue; it becomes relevant when that revenue relationship can realistically shape professional choice.

Substitution becomes appropriate when the particular commercially favored option cannot be recommended with sufficient independence but another clinically reasonable option can. Substitution preserves the underlying preventive objective while removing or reducing the problematic commercial linkage. It is especially relevant when alternatives are therapeutically or practically adequate and the original recommendation is unusually sensitive to organizational reward.

Abstention is the strongest response. It is justified when neither disclosure, separation, nor substitution leaves a recommendation that can be independently defended. Evidence linking financial conflicts with more favorable recommendations in several healthcare recommendation settings supports caution [25], but it does not establish a universal abstention rule. Abstention can itself harm patients when useful preventive care is delayed, alternatives are unavailable, or the commercial connection is too remote to threaten judgment.

Table 2 translates these distinctions into response conditions without treating them as a mandatory staircase. A stronger intervention is warranted only when the less intrusive option leaves the material integrity problem unresolved.

Table 2. Matching ethical responses to unresolved integrity problems in commercially linked preventive recommendations

Response	Recommendation-integrity problem it primarily addresses	Professional control required for the response to work	Treatment of patient alternatives	Residual commercial influence that may remain	When the response is likely insufficient or disproportionate
Disclosure	Patient cannot reasonably identify a commercially relevant interest	Pharmacist still retains usable independent judgment	Material alternatives remain fairly presented	Commercial interest remains present but visible	Insufficient when disclosure leaves recommendation control commercially constrained; disproportionate when the interest is remote and immaterial
Separation	Commercial and professional decision roles are too closely coupled	Recommendation authority can be reassigned or insulated from the commercial role	Alternatives must remain available to the independent decision-maker	Organizational benefit may remain, but direct decision pressure is reduced	Insufficient when organizational incentives continue to govern the supposedly independent decision
Substitution	A particular option is commercially compromised while the preventive objective remains legitimate	Pharmacist can recommend a clinically adequate alternative	Substitute must be genuinely reasonable for the patient rather than merely less profitable	General organizational revenue interests may persist	Inappropriate when substitutes are clinically inferior, inaccessible, or unavailable
Abstention	No available recommendation can be made with adequate	Pharmacist must be able to decline or redirect the recommendation	Referral, deferral, or independent advice should	Commercial influence is removed from the pharmacist's recommendation act	Disproportionate when the recommendation is strongly evidence-determined, commercial influence is

independence under existing conditions	remain feasible where possible	remote, or abstention would create avoidable harm
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Organizational safeguards

A recommendation-integrity regime cannot depend exclusively on individual pharmacists resisting commercial pressure encounter by encounter. Work-system research shows that pharmacy environments can facilitate or inhibit the professional behaviors practitioners are expected to enact [26]. The organizational question is therefore whether independent judgment is practically supported.

Safeguards should correspond to the actual route of influence. Implementation research in community pharmacy shows that barriers, implementation strategies, and outcomes are interdependent, making context-sensitive selection preferable to symbolic standardization [27]. Relevant safeguards may consequently include protecting pharmacist discretion from recommendation-sensitive targets, ensuring access to reasonable alternatives, establishing routes for challenging promotional expectations, separating professional evaluation from sales performance where necessary, and reviewing patterns that could reveal systematic distortion.

Formal arrangements should also be evaluated for what they accomplish. Pharmacy crisis-management research found that some organizational practices were associated with favorable outcomes while other formally plausible measures produced null or adverse patterns [28]. Realist evaluation of extended pharmacy services similarly demonstrates that organizational interventions operate through context-dependent mechanisms rather than producing invariant effects [29]. Taken together, these studies support a general design principle: integrity safeguards should be assessed through the conditions and behaviors they change, not through their existence on paper [27-29].

Organizational responsibility therefore complements rather than displaces individual professional responsibility. Pharmacists remain accountable for recommendations they make, while employers and regulators remain accountable for whether the practice environment permits those recommendations to be independently formed, challenged, substituted, or withheld.

Boundary conditions and objections

The strongest objection to the framework is that commercial benefit and good preventive care frequently coincide. That objection is valid. Financial incentives do not produce uniform professional responses [14], and an evidence-supported product does not become clinically inappropriate merely because the pharmacy earns revenue from its sale. The framework therefore does not require proof of commercial neutrality. It requires that the recommendation remain independently justifiable and practically open to commercially inconvenient alternatives where those alternatives matter.

A second objection is that excessive conflict management could itself damage trust by implying misconduct where none exists. Trust evidence supports caution here: patient reactions to disclosed financial relationships are variable [21], and perceived disagreement among experts is only one contributor to public trust [22]. Transparency and stronger responses should therefore be proportionate to material integrity risks rather than used performatively.

A third boundary concerns the inferential strength of the evidence. Much of the direct community-pharmacy literature identifies ethical tensions, organizational constraints, or professionalism-related conditions rather than demonstrating that a particular financial interest caused a particular recommendation. Even large datasets linking financial relationships to professionalism-relevant outcomes cannot establish individual causal pathways. For example, physician complaint data have been associated with industry-payment patterns, but the observational design does not show that payments caused the complaints [30]. The Recommendation-Integrity Framework therefore identifies conditions that warrant scrutiny and differentiated responses; it does not convert association into proof of unethical intent.

Regulatory and practice implications

Regulation should distinguish transparency requirements from substantive management of influence. Standardized disclosure can improve visibility of relevant interests [24], but governance should also address circumstances in which the professional making the recommendation lacks practical independence. Policies that require disclosure while leaving recommendation-sensitive

incentives or managerial constraints untouched may create formal transparency without restoring integrity. Community-pharmacy organizations should similarly examine the route by which commercial considerations enter advice. Research on retail product practices, professional autonomy, and pharmacy policy environments indicates that these influences can operate through product selection, organizational culture, managerial control, and broader professional-policy conditions [10, 11, 15]. Integrity protection should therefore focus on preserving usable professional discretion, reasonable alternatives, and escalation mechanisms rather than attempting to eliminate every commercial interest from a retail healthcare organization. Evaluation should ask whether safeguards alter recommendation conditions in practice. Context-sensitive implementation evidence supports monitoring whether pharmacists can depart from preferred products, present alternatives, challenge sales-linked expectations, and redirect patients when appropriate [27]. No universal numerical threshold for acceptable commercial influence can be justified from the present evidence. Regulation is better directed toward auditable processes and identifiable failures of independence than toward unsupported quantitative cut-offs.

Conclusion

Preventive advice can remain professionally independent when a pharmacy benefits from the resulting purchase, but only conditionally. Commercial benefit creates an ethical reason for scrutiny when it is sufficiently connected to the recommendation to threaten professional judgment; it does not itself prove bias. Recommendation integrity is preserved when advice remains independently justifiable, reasonable alternatives are treated fairly, the pharmacist retains usable professional discretion, and organizational conditions support rather than obstruct that discretion. Disclosure is therefore neither unnecessary nor universally sufficient. Separation, substitution, and abstention address different residual integrity problems and should be used proportionately. The decisive ethical question is not whether commerce is present, but whether commercial considerations have displaced the professional reasons that ought to govern the recommendation.

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