Q. My supervisor’s daughter recently received a new video iPod from the company that has the service contract for our hematology lab equipment. The supervisor defends accepting it, saying that she has worked closely with this particular representative for many years; that they are close personal friends, and that the video iPod was in the corporate gift budget for the vendor. Another company, which provides reagents and supplies, has offered to provide a luncheon during Medical Laboratory Professionals Week. Is this appropriate? What are the limits on accepting gifts in the course of business?

A. For years, critics of healthcare have complained that undue influence at the level of individuals (from physicians, institutions, pharmaceutical companies, and other business partners) has made American medicine less efficient and more costly than it should be. As a result, healthcare workers, including laboratory staff, have been subject to more restrictions on their business relations with vendors and clients than some of their colleagues in other industries. Despite this, the details of corporate gift policies remain obscure for many hospital employees. Such unfamiliarity, coupled with the sense that “everybody does it,” can lead to real trouble.

Most companies — hospital and other healthcare institutions included — now have strict policies about what gifts employees can and cannot accept in the course of business. Almost all corporations prohibit employees from accepting gifts that have more than token value, which is generally set in the range of $20 to $50. The fact that the gift was given to the supervisor’s daughter does not circumvent the hospital policy on gifts; in fact, the gift-taking may be guilty of improper use of his own gift expense account, which probably has similar restrictions on its use.

The usual policy on accepting gifts requires that gifts be infrequent, related to business purposes, and of a type that is generally acceptable in the course of business practices. Larger gifts can sometimes be acceptable, as long as there is permission from the proper corporate executive, and when circumstances permit. For example, a vendor might give a retirement gift that is more generous than might otherwise be allowed — and possibly perfectly acceptable — to a laboratory employee with whom they have had a long relationship, in part because the chances that a gift in those circumstances will result in undue favoritism toward the vendor is low. After all, the retiring recipient is leaving any position of potential authority over business decisions.

Such influence over business decisions is precisely what corporate gift policies are designed to prevent. Such policies serve to encourage corporate employees to be more objective in business relations and to help ensure that decisions are made on the basis of sound business analysis, rather than on the basis of favoritism carried with individuals who have the responsibility for making them. In the case you describe, the gift of an expensive video-MP3 player to the child of your supervisor, an employee in a position to affect which company gets the service contract, might be perceived as an attempt to solidify a maintenance contract in the face of an increasingly competitive marketplace by increasing personal favor with her.

The close social relationship that your supervisor has with the vendor might also leave her open to a charge of conflict of interest. Most corporations will at least require such a relationship be disclosed, even if it is not sufficient to require that the individual in question excuse herself from business dealings with that company. The vendor himself might be guilty of improper use of his own gift expense account, which probably has similar restrictions on its use.

The fact that the gift was given to the supervisor’s daughter does not circumvent the hospital policy on gifts; in fact, the gift-giving may make things worse because involving the daughter seems to be an obvious attempt to do just that. Many corporate policies will specify that it is also unacceptable for the immediate family of employees to accept gifts from business partners that would be forbidden to the employee. The fact that there is no legitimate business use for an iPod in the clinical lab makes the gift even more suspect.

Although gift policies are usually associated with vendor relations, in healthcare, policies are often extended to cover gifts from patients as well. There is no problem with taking the occasional plate of cookies or hand-knitted scarf from a grateful patient, but anything more elaborate or expensive should generally be subject to the same discrimination as gifts from employees.

Occasionally, employees will innocently accept a gift that exceeds corporate gift limits because they are unfamiliar with the gift and unaware of its value. A fine bottle of wine, for example, can easily exceed the “token” limit, but anyone other than a connoisseur might not know it. Thus, it is a good idea not to accept any unconventional gift from a vendor or patient without checking your corporate gift policy first. If the gift must be declined, a simple explanation of company policy will usually suffice to prevent hurt feelings.

Depending on how your hospital’s policy on gifts is written, the Medical Laboratory Professionals Week luncheon might be permissible. It differs from the iPod in several important ways. Luncheons, especially for professional recognition, are customary in business, do not generally exceed the “token” limit on a per-plate basis, and are less likely to affect the judgment of the individuals responsible for making business decisions. Most corporate gift policies make entertainment — including meals — subject to the same general limits as other gifts but provide somewhat more leeway for them for these reasons. Even so, extravagant meals, especially if limited to managers and supervisors or meals that include alcohol, may be prohibited.

Employees need to understand the importance of knowing the details of their institution’s policy on gifts, because failing to adhere to the policy can result in disciplinary action. If the transgression is egregious enough, or if there are repeated instances, an employee can face dismissal. This is an area where the old axiom “when in doubt, don’t” is the best advice.