Now to a nightly news investigation into the relationship between doctors and companies that make drugs and devices. A 2017 study showed that roughly half of U.S. doctors received payments from the industry totaling almost $2.5 billion in just one year. Stephanie Goff reports on the experience of one woman who believes those payments affected her quality of care.

In 2016, Wendy Kinect got the news every woman fears - she tested positive for the breast cancer gene.

Wendy: “I felt like if I had it, I would eliminate my risk. As much as possible.”

That meant a double mastectomy, followed by breast reconstruction. She turned to plastic surgeon, Dr. Max Lefeldt. But almost immediately after the surgery, Kinect was worried.

Wendy: “I was in excruciating pain. I kind of felt something was wrong.”

What she didn’t know was that the critical support device that Dr. Lefeldt had used for the reconstruction - something called the SERI scaffold - had failed.

Wendy: “apparently all the SERI had just dispersed inside my body.”

Wendy has now had a total of 6 procedures. With nerve damage so bad she may never be pain free. The SERI scaffold used in her first surgery was made my medical device manufacturer Allergan. It is FDA approved, but not specifically for breast reconstruction. Wendy: “I was shocked and you know I thought well obviously this is something I should’ve been told.”
Kinect said she wasn’t told. She thinks money may to be blame. Dr. Lefeldt is a paid consultant and researcher for Allergan, the maker of the SERI scaffold. He also owns stock in the company. By the time Kinect was treated in 2016, Dr. Lefeldt had earned nearly $470,000 from the company, doing consulting and research. Something she says she only later learned online.

Wendy: “In one way, it made me feel like oh, that’s why this happened. You know, the doctor was being paid to use this.”

Do you think the money tainted this doctor’s medical judgment? Wendy: “in my opinion, yes.”

By law, Dr. Lefeldt is not required to disclose his financial ties directly to the patient during treatment - no doctor is. Physicians only have to report the money to the federal government. The information is publicly accessible but consumer watchdogs say patients don’t check.

Carmen Balber: “patients are harmed when doctors have a pecuniary interest in the medical devices and drugs that they’re prescribing and recommending to their patients.”

Dr. Lefeldt declined NBC’s request for an interview but on his website assures patients that any financial affiliations he has will have no bearing on his clinical recommendations. But research shows doctors receiving even a free meal can influence what brand name drugs they prescribe.

So Lester, the big message here is doctors have to report these payments to the government that’s then publicly accessible online but patients need to talk to their doctors as well. Ask them why they are using a specific medical device and of course get that second opinion.