

Study: Most doctors take gifts Survey suggests 95% get freebies from drug makers

By Denise Gellene, Los Angeles Times | April 26, 2007

LOS ANGELES -- Nearly 95 percent of physicians in the United States receive free food, beverages, drug samples, sports tickets, or other benefits from drug company sales representatives eager to influence their prescribing habits, according to a report today in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

Family practice doctors, who prescribe a broad range of drugs, were more likely to receive visits and gifts from sales reps than other specialist groups involved in the survey, researchers said.

Doctors in group practices were likelier to pocket fees for consulting or lectures than physicians at hospitals and clinics, which tend to have rules limiting contacts between the medical staff and industry, according to the report.

The study of 1,600 doctors, conducted in 2003 and 2004, is the first to look at physician-industry relationships since the American Medical Association and drug industry each set voluntary limits on the nature and value of gifts doctors could receive in 2002.

The guidelines were prompted by increasing concerns over possible conflicts of interest related to handouts and freebies from drug companies.

Lead author Eric Campbell, assistant professor of medicine at the Institute for Health Policy at Massachusetts General Hospital, said he was surprised to find that the relationships between physicians and industry were so widespread.

Campbell said the study was not designed to assess whether the relationships influenced doctors' prescribing habits or affected patient care. Nonetheless, he said, it was clear that many doctors benefited directly from the industry's marketing tactics and it was safe to assume that drug companies also benefited.

The industry spends more than \$20 billion a year on marketing, he said, the bulk of which goes to physicians in the form of samples, lunches, and sponsorship of educational programs, among other things, according to previous research.

"If the companies didn't benefit from the relationships, they wouldn't be doing it," he said.

AMA guidelines state gifts primarily should benefit patients and should not be of substantial value. The Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, or PhRMA, a drug industry trade organization, recommends gifts that support a medical practice, such as a stethoscope, and do not exceed \$100 in value.

Dr. Jerome P. Kassirer, a professor at Tufts University School of Medicine, who was not involved in the research, said the guidelines should be expanded because many marketing tactics used by the industry fall outside them. "The whole notion of 'benefit to the patient' is too lax," he said. "Just because a pharmaceutical company gives medical students stethoscopes doesn't mean they should take them."

Kassirer said free samples seem innocuous, but they can lead to prescriptions for new, expensive drugs that might be no better than older, less expensive ones. "Giving a patient free samples means the doctor has to finish off the course of treatment with a prescription," said Kassirer, a former editor of the journal. ■