

Gifts to Physicians From Industry

To the Editor.—Controversy surrounds the relationship between the pharmaceutical industry and physicians.¹⁻³ Congressional hearings have focused on the extravagant gifts that some physicians have received from pharmaceutical companies, implying that many physicians routinely accept these gifts (*Am Med News*, December 28, 1990). Recently, the American Medical Association (AMA) published guidelines stating that gifts to physicians are acceptable if they entail a benefit to patients and are of no substantial value.⁴ Gifts of minimal value are also acceptable if they are related to the physician's work.⁴ Despite these reports, there are few data in the medical literature examining to what extent current pharmaceutical gift-giving behaviors may comply with recent guidelines.

Exhibit hall gift promotions are a common part of major medical meetings. While attending a recent national meeting of a major medical specialty, I studied a selection of pharmaceutical exhibits to determine the types and proportions of free gifts that were being distributed by exhibitors to physician attendees. Exhibitors were inspected once over a 3-day period. Eligible exhibitors were restricted to those who marketed prescription pharmaceutical products. At each exhibit, I recorded the name of the pharmaceutical company, its pharmaceutical products, and any free promotional items on display.

Sixty-eight different prescription pharmaceutical exhibitors were studied, comprising 75% of all prescription pharmaceutical product booths exhibited at the meeting (n=92) and 55 separate pharmaceutical companies. Ninety-one percent of all exhibitors surveyed distributed different types of free promotional gift items, which are summarized in the Table.

The promotional gift tabulations are likely to be conservative for several reasons. Many pharmaceutical exhibitors distributed their more expensive exhibit hall gift items only after a physician had entered into a dialogue with the

Promotional Gift Items Displayed and Distributed by Pharmaceutical Companies

Gift Type	%
Minimal value*†	29
>Minimal value‡	34
Food	10
Drug samples	12
Nothing	9
Other	6
Total	100 (n=68)

*For example, pens, notepads, and penlights.

†As defined by American Medical Association guidelines on drug industry gifts.

‡For example, watches, clocks, games, tape recorders, cameras, stuffed animals, and clothes.

pharmaceutical representative. Such promotional items were usually kept out of sight under an exhibit table. In addition, several pharmaceutical companies distributed free tickets to entertainment events not occurring at the exhibit hall. Neither of these types of gift promotions was included in my estimates.

The extent to which physicians accept pharmaceutical gifts is unknown. However, this study demonstrates that most pharmaceutical exhibitors who market prescription pharmaceutical products distribute free promotional gift items to attendees at medical meetings. According to current AMA guidelines, at least one third of these gifts might be considered inappropriate since they are unlikely to provide direct benefit to the patient and are of greater than minimal value. Some researchers have suggested that physician acceptance of any gifts from the pharmaceutical industry is problematic because of the traditional features of reciprocity implicit in all gift-taking behaviors.⁵

My informal study suggests that the extent of exhibit hall gift promotions can be tracked and compared with applicable guidelines. Further work is needed to define the extent of pharmaceutical gift promotions at all levels of medical education, private practice, and continuing medical education. Ultimately, such research should attempt to define what effects such promotions have on physician prescribing behaviors, as well as the costs of prescription drugs for patients.

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To the Editor.—The Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs of the AMA¹ has taken an important step toward clarifying the relationship between the medical service industry and physicians. Unfortunately, it is neglecting an important area of concern.

Many university faculty members and prominent practicing physicians serve as paid consultants to major pharmaceutical houses and travel around the country giving seminars and educational conferences that are frequently, although not always, thinly veiled promotions for particular products. In doing so, they exercise their rights as individuals to contract for services, but they also abrogate their responsibilities as faculty members to pursue an impartial view of medical research and therapy.

When they become agents of industry, they should be barred from serving on any major university or hospital committees that might cause a conflict of interest, such as pharmacy and therapeutics committees and committees that set standards of care or practice guidelines or allocate public research

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Edited by Drummond Rennie, MD, Deputy Editor (West), and Don Riesenber, MD, Senior Editor.