

Survey: Majority of Physicians Have Industry Ties

BY MARY ELLEN SCHNEIDER
New York Bureau

Nearly all physicians have ties to the pharmaceutical or device industries ranging from accepting drug samples to serving on a speakers' bureau, according to a survey of physicians across six specialties.

The study found that 94% of physicians surveyed reported some type of relationship with industry. The most frequently cited interaction (83%) was receiving food in the workplace. A majority of physicians surveyed (78%) also reported accepting drug samples.

Fewer physicians, about 35%, reported accepting reimbursement for admission to continuing medical education meetings or other meeting-related expenses, and 28% said they received payments from industry for professional services such as consulting, speaking, serving on an advisory board, or enrolling patients in clinical trials (*N. Engl. J. Med.* 2007;356:1742-50).

Physicians contacted by this news organization said that while the study raises important issues, it is not a cause for alarm since many of the industry interactions outlined in the study are essential and appropriate.

Eric G. Campbell, Ph.D., of the Institute for Health Policy at Massachusetts Gen-

eral Hospital-Partners Health Care System in Boston, and his colleagues surveyed 3,167 physicians working in anesthesiology, cardiology, family practice, general surgery, internal medicine, and pediatrics.

Of those surveyed, 1,662 completed the questionnaire for an overall response rate of about 52%. The study was supported by a grant from the Institute on Medicine as a Profession.

The type and extent of reported interaction with representatives of the pharmaceutical and device industries varied by specialty, the researchers found. For example, cardiologists were more than twice as likely as family physicians to receive payments for professional services, such as consulting or work on clinical trials.

Family physicians held the most meetings with industry representatives, on average about 16 meetings per month, according to the study.

Practice setting also played a role in the interaction. Physicians in group practice were six times more likely to receive drug samples than were those working in hos-

pitals, clinics, or staff-model health maintenance organizations. Physicians in group practice were also three times as likely to receive gifts and nearly four times as likely to receive payments for professional services.

The study did not assess the appropriateness of the relationships with industry; however, the researchers concluded that the variations in relationships by specialty may indicate a need for guidelines that are specific to specialties and practice settings.

In an interview, Dr. James King, president-elect of the American Academy of Family Physicians said, "I don't think it's a major cause for concern."

Dr. King said he was not surprised by the survey findings, especially since it is a common practice for physicians to accept drug samples in an effort to save their patients money. Most practices are likely operating within the guidelines set out by the American Medical Association, he said. The AMA guidelines recommend that gifts should primarily have a benefit to patients and should not be of substantial value. For example, modest meals and textbooks are ac-

ceptable under the AMA guidelines, but cash payments should not be accepted.

The relationship with industry should continue to be watched and addressed, said Dr. King, and he recommended that physicians review their own ethical guidelines from time to time and refuse to accept any gift that would inappropriately influence their prescribing habits.

The main responsibility of physicians who do have relationships with industry is to ensure that patients' interests always come first and to disclose any financial conflicts, Dr. Jack Lewin, CEO of the American College of Cardiology, said in an interview.

ACC has a policy requiring disclosure of industry relationships for anyone involved in the group's activities, he said. "We really do have a firewall."

However, many of the relationships between cardiologists and industry are necessary and appropriate, he said, since industry is the main source of research on new treatments.

But more can be done to reduce concerns about potential conflict of interest, Dr. Lewin said. For example, an increase in the number of publicly funded independent reviews of drugs and devices and increases in federal research funding would help to clarify some of the gray areas of cardiovascular care, he said. ■

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F Y I

Skin Care Web Site Launched

A new Web site offers information on the treatment and management of aging skin. The site, www.agingwithbeauty.com, gives information on techniques such as microdermabrasion and chemical peels, and offers tips on slowing the aging process. It is sponsored by Sanofi-Aventis.

Quality Reporting Questions Answered

More than 50 frequently asked questions about the Physician Quality Reporting Initiative are available on the Web site of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. Visit www.cms.hhs.gov/PQRI

and scroll down to the "Related Links Inside CMS" section. Click on the "All PQRI FAQs" link to access the list.

Overview of Covering the Uninsured

The Alliance for Health Reform is offering an overview of how health coverage is obtained. "Health Care Coverage in America: Understanding the Issues and Proposed Solutions," includes topics such as who is uninsured, approaches to covering the uninsured, and coverage proposals. Go to www.allhealth.org/publications/uninsured/health_care_coverage_in_america_2007_54.pdf to download.

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