

REVIEW ARTICLE

Relationship between Doctors and Pharmaceutical Industry: An Ethical Perspective**Birendra Kumar Mandal*¹, Santosh Kumar Yadav², Abhishek Karn¹, Ajit Kumar Sah³**¹*Dept of Forensic Medicine & Toxicology, Chitwan School of Medical Sciences, Bharatpur-10, Chitwan, Nepal*²*Dept of Oral & Maxillofacial Surgery, Chitwan School of Medical Sciences, Bharatpur-10, Chitwan, Nepal*³*Dept of Pharmacology, Chitwan School of Medical Sciences, Bharatpur-10, Chitwan, Nepal*

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ABSTRACT

Interactions between doctors and pharmaceutical industry were found to start as early as medical school and to continue well into practice ^[1]. This relationship is even stronger in developing countries such as Nepal, and may lead to adverse outcomes especially for the consumer. Not only do drug companies play a vital role in sponsoring continued professional development (CPD) programmes, they are also at times 'nice enough' to grant personal favors to their 'best prescribers'. This article reviews the salient aspects of the relationship between doctors and pharmaceutical industries and its future consequences.

Key words: Medical Ethics, Pharmaceutical Industry, Prescription.**INTRODUCTION**

Interactions between doctors and pharmaceutical industry have been increased significantly in over the last several years and it becomes such common activities. The primary aim of medical profession is to render service to humanity. Financial gain is a subordinate consideration. But the basic role of a medical representative is to apprise the doctor about his company's products including the drugs. There is nothing wrong in that as long as the ultimate beneficiary of this information is the patient. After all, continued professional development is an essential component of a good health care system ^[2].

There is a conflict between the interests of the patient and those of the doctors as far as the drug promotion is concerned. A conflict of interest exists when a primary ethical or professional interest clashes with financial self interest, a situation that arises commonly in medical profession. WHO defines drugs promotion as all informational and persuasive activities by manufacturers, distributors to induce /influence the sale and use of medicinal drugs. Often, drug promotion strategies adopted by various drug companies are too attractive to be resisted by a doctor. Because of the high competition among drug companies to sell their products much more, they have to increase the sales strategy by attracting physicians through the aggressiveness of medical representatives. They tend to have

more frequent interactions to encourage physicians to prescribe drugs and thus increase sales ^[3, 4]. Such interactions are gifts, samples, industry-paid meals, funding for travel or lodging to attend educational symposia, CME (Continuing Medical Education) sponsorship, honoraria, research funding, and employment ^[1]. These interactions would lead to diminish objectivity of professional judgments and conflict of interests of physicians. Thus conflict of interests would violate best interests of patients and also decline physician's professionalism and integrity.

A majority of physicians don't consider it unethical to accept such gifts as receipt of pens, pen-stand, pads, calendars, drug samples, company funded lunch or dinner etc at which company's products are favorably mentioned.^[5] But acceptance of expensive gifts of recreational value rather than professional activities is unethical according to them. Also, they concur not to support medical products of drug companies whose medical representatives furnish biased or self-serving information regarding their products. Even among those doctors who claim that they only prescribe medicines which are most beneficial to their patients irrespective of the fact that they are constantly visited and pressurized by pharmaceutical companies to prescribe their brands only - a substantial body of evidence

suggests otherwise. Because when a gift is given, it imposes on a doctor a sense of indebtedness. As an upright man instructed in the art of healing, he may feel inclined to reciprocate resulting in shoddy prescriptions^[6].

Interaction Effects

Interactions between physicians with pharmaceutical industry were found to have several negative outcomes. Following negative outcomes are^[1].

- **Knowledge**, inability to identify wrong claims about medication.
- **Attitude**, positive attitude towards medical representatives, awareness, preference and rapid prescribing of new drugs.
- **Behavior**, making formulary requests for medication that rarely held importance advantages over existing ones, non-rational prescribing behavior, increasing prescription rate, and prescribing fewer generic drugs but more expensive, newer medications at no demonstrated advantage.

Sixteen studies were identified that assessed the impact of the physician's industry interaction on knowledge, attitudes, and prescribing practices of physicians^[1].

Patients are the main victim of these interactions, it causing drugs price become more expensive for them, because costs for the interactions is calculated as a cost for product's marketing strategy including commission fee for physicians. Furthermore, physicians could give several types of drugs to the patients which will make total costs raised, even the patients itself don't need the drugs.

Ethical Issues

The interactions between physicians and pharmaceutical industry which causing conflict of interests are violating concepts of ethical theory, duties, rights, best practice, and commitments.

In the case of interactions between physicians and pharmaceutical industry, it also against the standard principles of ethics such as:

- **Principles of Fiduciary** (act in the best interests of the company and its investor), self benefit at expense of company.
- **Principles of Fairness** (deal fairly with all parties), pharmaceutical industry often doing unfair competitive advantages in sales and marketing by getting too aggressive to the physicians. In the end it will cause conflict of interests and violates best interests of patients.
- **Principles of Transparency** (conduct business in a truthful and open manner), physician's truthfulness and honesty in prescription of

medication, disclosure of any gifts given by pharmaceutical industry to the physicians.

- **Principles of Dignity** (respect the dignity of all people), violates to protect patient's health by giving different kinds of drugs which in fact don't need by the patients itself and possibility several drugs could counteract each other.
- **Principles of Citizenship** (acts as responsible members of community), although there is code of practice on the promotion of drugs for pharmaceutical industry and code of medical ethics for physicians, most of them doesn't have no respect within the codes.

As a consequence of the relationship between doctors and drug companies, the credibility of medical profession in the eyes of the patients and the public is ever on the decline. If a patient gets to know that the doctor is prescribing medical advice on the basis of commercial influence he may lose trust and confidence in the doctor (which are the precursors to any successful treatment). In such a scenario, patients are more likely than doctors to believe that gifts may influence prescribing behavior that is morally inappropriate according to them^[7, 8].

Identifying Root Cause

The unethical relationship between pharmaceutical industry and physicians also commented by experts. Experts blamed a lack of regulations, poor monitoring, unfair business competition, corruption and people's lack of awareness about drug pricing for the high charges.

Recommendations

Several recommendations for the interactions between pharmaceutical industry and physicians are:

- **Cooperation between related organizations:** Cooperation and coordination are needed between many elements such as government, pharmaceutical industry, and professional organizations or associations to solve this unethical alliance of physicians and pharmaceutical industry by creating comprehensive regulation and ethical guideline.
- **Gifts:** Discourages acceptance of all kinds of gifts, promotional items, free lunch, payment for travel to or time at meetings, and payment for participation in CME. Gifts that could be accepted by physicians should primarily benefit patients such as textbook that serve for educational function.
- **Research Support:** Research support or funding should not be prohibited as long as pharmaceutical industry and physicians keep

their transparency to the public via electronic media.

-Educate patients about generic and patent drugs: Patients should be socialized about generic and patent drugs. They should know benefits of generic drugs. Generics drugs are more affordable and will give the same results as patent drugs. Generic drugs information with its benefits in the pocket-size books would easier patients carrying drugs information while on a trip.

-Hospital drug formularies: Hospital and medical group formulary committees and committees overseeing purchases of medical devices should exclude physicians (and all health care professionals) with financial relationships with drug manufacturers, including those who receive any gift, inducement, grant, or contract. These policies would help ensure that decision making for formulary drugs and medical devices is based solely on the best available scientific evidence ^[1].

CONCLUSION

Interactions between physicians with pharmaceutical industry were found to have several negative outcomes that will diminish patient's best interests. Such interactions are gifts, samples, industry-paid meals, funding for travel or lodging to attend educational symposia, CME sponsorship, honoraria, research funding, and employment. Government need to stringent regulation in order to prevent the unethical alliance between doctors with pharmaceutical industry.

Cooperation and coordination are needed between many elements such as government, pharmaceutical industry, and professional organizations or associations to solve this unethical alliance of physicians and pharmaceutical industry by creating

comprehensive ethical guidelines. Each element should have commitment with the ethical guidelines. Patients also need education about benefits of generic drugs which more affordable and give the results as well as patent drugs.

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