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Urologists’ Views on Contact With Industry Representatives: A Pilot Survey

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A substantial body of research examines the nature of physician-industry relationships, with many authors concluding that such intimate ties invite major conflicts of interest. The most comprehensive definition for conflict of interest can be found in a 1993 NEJM article. A set of conditions under which professional judgment could be compromised by a patient’s care...can be influenced by financial gain. Paid speaking engagements, gifts, travel, owning of company shares etc. Conflicts of interest arise because physicians are the target of substantial product marketing. Doctors’ offices are inundated with drug samples, pens, notebooks for the purpose of creating familiarity with a drug name or device brand. Doctors also receive lunch-hour presentations billed as educational events aimed at teaching the group about new medications or the updated version of a device being introduced to market.

Doctors feel that industry reps provide important teaching and training opportunities which would otherwise go unfilled. Indeed, reps can have such intimate roles in patient care that a study of surgeons found that these physicians viewed their device reps as valuable members of the surgical team. But research shows that despite doctors’ insistance otherwise, surgical CME demonstrates to lead in prescription rates,1 and continues to provide education by the attendant physicians. In the surgical suite, it has been shown that in the same way as regular interaction with PR increases the chance of a drug being added to a hospital’s formulary, regular contact with DMR increases the likelihood that the devices they market will be used over a competitor’s, regardless of differences in efficacy or functionality. This problem is further compounded by the brand loyalty that surgeons maintain for an extended time. This has significant effects on healthcare costs. One study found that up to 62% of a hospital’s expenditure on surgical devices goes to preference items, an area where the presence of a device rep has a substantial impact.

Despite the amount of “education” physicians are receiving, research has also shown that having an established relationship with pharmaceutical representatives actually reduces rather than increases physicians awareness of adverse drug effects. A 2000 landmark article was published in JAMA reviewing 16 previous studies regarding these relationships, reporting averages of 4 monthly interactions and the receipt of 6 gifts per year from industry representatives, or pharmaceutical representatives (PR) or device manufacturer representatives (DMR). Later studies showed even greater numbers of meetings per month with industry representatives. Indeed these interaction are pervasive, accepted as simply part of the healthcare industry milieu, but the effects are undeniable, and greater awareness of them is paramount to ensuring equity in healthcare delivery.

Purpose: The current survey aims to determine the various ways in which urologists at all levels of training view the nature of their relationships with industry representatives, and the effects these relationships may have on clinical practice and opinions regarding the following:

- the ability of industry-supplied gifts to compromise judgment
- the utility and appropriateness of industry representatives in the clinical setting
- the effects of governmental regulations addressing physician contact
- the effects of receipt of promotional items in influencing clinical behaviors
- the need for laws governing physician contact with industry representatives

Methods: We sent an anonymous SurveyMonkey® questionnaire to a cohort of approximately 1700 practicing urologists in various urologic subspecialties across the country. The questionnaire elicited information related to demographics, personal awareness of institutional guidelines regarding PR/DMR, and opinions regarding the following:

- that devices market will be used over a competitor’s, regardless of differences in efficacy or functionality. This problem is further compounded by the brand loyalty that surgeons maintain for an extended time. This has significant effects on healthcare costs. One study found that up to 62% of a hospital’s expenditure on surgical devices goes to preference items, an area where the presence of a device rep has a substantial impact.

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