

Ethical Guidelines for General Practitioners on Relationship with the Pharmaceutical Industry

Introduction

Early medical practitioners prepared their own therapeutic agents using herbs, salts and animal matter. Later, various components of medicaments were commercially available, for example tinctures, paraffin etc. But what was dispensed to the patients had been prepared with many ingredients and therefore commercially promoting any single ingredient was not useful.

During the twentieth century the pharmaceutical industry became highly evolved. The pharmaceutical industry commenced preparing therapeutic agents in bulk, for example insulin. When two or more companies began preparing the same agent, competition set in and each company claimed that its product was superior. The pharmaceutical industry was in a unique position among industries when it came to promoting the product. Promoting the product to the consumer is not permitted, and therefore they had to reach the prescriber.

This was the beginning of the promotion of therapeutic agents to doctors. The issue became more complicated by the advent of the so called research pharmaceutical firms which discovered new therapeutic agents. Funds were heavily consumed in research and hence it was considered justifiable to recover the costs from patients. Patent rights prohibit other companies producing the agent for a specified period.

Pharmaceutical companies compete with each other to influence the prescribers. This competition sometimes involves misinformation and rewarding. It is at this point that ethical guidance helps the general practitioner.

Promotional Activities

Promotion by the pharmaceutical companies may affect the professional activities of general practitioners in many ways. When presenting information about the products to doctors the pharmaceutical companies may frequently manipulate the doctors for their benefit.

They sometimes withhold data which are very important. The pharmaceutical company that introduced the antidepressant paroxetine to the market withheld the fact that it induced suicidal tendencies in adolescents. The general practitioners should be aware of these facts.

Assessing the Therapeutic Benefits Claimed by the Pharmaceutical Industry

The general practitioner must not be carried away by photographs and material in large print in flashy literature printed on glossy paper. The material in these documents is highly selective. It is always safe to use independent, authoritative sources like the British National Formulary, medical journals and drug indexes to verify the claims. The general practitioners can always request for the detailed literature of the product from the pharmaceutical

companies. The product insert may be a reliable source of information about the drug. General practitioners have to read very carefully about the undesired effects of the drug, drug interactions, and safety during pregnancy and lactation. Important drug interactions mentioned in the literature handed over to general practitioners are not routinely discussed by the pharmaceutical detailmen. Though the interaction of non sedative antihistamines and macrolides is potentially fatal the companies dealing with these drugs do not mention this when they promote the products. The fact that ciprofloxacin can cause tendinitis is not mentioned in the routine literature given by the company or by the detailman.

Study the Quoted Price Advantage Carefully.

The pharmaceutical detailmen sometimes compare prices of packs containing different quantities. The price of a pack containing fourteen tablets may be compared with the price of a pack containing twenty eight tablets. The price of five hundred mg tablets may be compared with the price of 250mg tablets. The antibiotic syrup bottles have various quantities. When comparing the cost of a bottle the quantity of medication in the bottle or the pack should also be considered.

Be Guarded Against Sexuality and Names of Celebrities Used in Literature and Trade Names.

The pharmaceutical industry sometimes uses unorthodox tactics to make the doctors remember their products. The name of a West Indies cricket legend is used as the trade name of a drug used in hypertension. The trade name of a NSAID is a single letter changed in the common four letter word. Trade name of an antihistamine sounds like “sexy “and trade names of sildenafil are sometimes evocative of lustful behavior. This strategy is adopted to make general practitioners remember the trade names easily. Hence general practitioners should focus only on the pharmaceutical validity of the product.

Gifts and Sponsorships.

One may accept common things like writing pads, ball point pens etc. The trade names or the name of the company should not appear in the prescription sheets of the pad. One must see that the trade name of a product on a complimentary tea mug or a calendar is not given prominence inside the clinic. Gifts like alcohol, music CDs should be politely rejected. IEC (information, education and communication) material printed by the pharmaceutical industry can be used provided that they do not carry advertisements and the contents are unbiased. It is not suitable to get a drug company help in your personal charity work. It is acceptable to solicit sponsorship of pharmaceutical industry for activities of an academic body or a medical association. The drug firm may be allowed to interact with the participants of the activity reasonably to promote their products. Extra care must be taken if the activity involves lay people. In these situations guidelines laid down by the medical bodies must be followed. One must not accept gifts of any form. Pharmaceutical companies offer foreign trips to doctors, their families and even to their extended families. It is grossly unethical to accept them. It is unethical to accept personal entertainment from drug companies.

Samples of the Products from the Pharmaceutical Industry.

The detailmen provide samples to promote their products. Issues that can arise when doctors gives samples to patients are

1. The patient may get the impression that it is the best brand.
2. The patient may purchase the product without a prescription in the future.
3. The doctors earn an undeserved advantage in the relationship with their patients.
4. The doctors may inadvertently become agents of companies.

The following can be adhered to circumvent above issues:

1. Inform patients about the other cost effective brands and the generics.
2. Explain as to how and why the sample was given to the doctor.
3. Stress that the product should not be bought ,without a prescription in the future

Being Employed in the Pharmaceutical Industry

The pharmaceutical companies are entitled to employ doctors. The doctors too have a right to be employed by them. In such situations, care should be taken to ensure that patients' interests are not compromised. The doctors' loyalty to the drug company should be within the frame work of Medical ethics. The duties of doctors when they are employed in pharmaceutical companies in Sri Lanka are processing documents to register new drugs, preparing and revising the product inserts and communicating with colleagues regarding any issues involving the company. These activities seldom create ethical conflicts. Conflicts of interests do arise, when doctors employed by pharmaceutical companies hold office in medical bodies.

Conducting Research Funded by Pharmaceutical Industry.

The doctors who receive research funds from pharmaceutical companies should adhere to norms of ethical and legal guide lines. The terms of funding have to be previously agreed and one should not accept any remuneration or benefits beyond the terms of funding. The financial commitment and its break up should be made public.

Being a Guest Speaker or a Guest in Sponsored Events.

The cost such as travelling, preparing the material should be obtained from the organizing medical body and not directly from the sponsor. Trade names should not be used in any part of the presentation. The practice of inviting the spouses of the doctors should be avoided.