

A National Survey of Physician–Industry Relationships

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FROM ABSTRACT:

Background:

Relationships between physicians and pharmaceutical, medical device, and other medically related industries have received considerable attention in recent years.

We surveyed physicians to collect information about their financial associations with [the drug] industry and the factors that predict those associations.

Methods

We conducted a national survey of 3167 physicians in six specialties (anesthesiology, cardiology, family practice, general surgery, internal medicine, and pediatrics).

Results

Most physicians (94%) reported some type of relationship with the pharmaceutical industry, and most of these relationships involved receiving food in the workplace (83%) or receiving drug samples (78%).

More than one third of the respondents (35%) received reimbursement for costs associated with professional meetings or continuing medical education, and more than one quarter (28%) received payments for consulting, giving lectures, or enrolling patients in trials.

Cardiologists were more than twice as likely as family practitioners to receive payments.

Family practitioners met more frequently with [drug] industry representatives than did physicians in other specialties, and physicians in solo, two-person, or group practices met more frequently with industry representatives than did physicians practicing in hospitals and clinics.

Conclusions

The results of this national survey indicate that relationships between physicians and [the drug] industry are common and underscore the variation among such relationships according to specialty, practice type, and professional activities.

THESE AUTHORS ALSO NOTE:

A study in 2000, showed that physicians met with drug industry representatives four times per month and residents accepted six gifts per year from drug industry representatives.

A 2001 survey showed that 92% of physicians received drug samples, 61% received meals, tickets to events, or free travel from drug companies, 13% received financial or other kinds of benefits from drug companies, and 12% received incentives for participation in drug clinical trials.

“Some physician–industry relationships have been associated with problematic changes in prescribing behaviors, hospital formulary additions, and increased perceptions of conflicts of interest among physicians.”

The goal of this study was to answer three questions.

- 1) What do physicians receive from the drug industry?
- 2) How often do physicians meet with drug industry representatives?
- 3) What characteristics are associated with the frequency and nature of physician–drug industry relationships?

In this study, from the 2003 Physician Master-file of the American Medical Association, from a list of 271,148 physicians, the authors randomly selected 584 physicians in each specialty, for a total sample of 3,504.

“Overall, 94% of the respondents reported some kind of relationship with [the drug] industry during the previous year.”

“As compared with physicians in hospitals or clinics and those in staff-model health maintenance organizations (HMOs), physicians in group practices were six times as likely to receive samples, three times as likely to receive gifts, and nearly four times as likely to receive payments for professional services.”

“Physicians in solo or group practices and those in university or medical-school practices also had much higher odds of receiving payments than did physicians in hospitals or clinics and those in staff-model HMOs.”

“Family practitioners reported the highest average number of meetings with industry representatives (16 meetings per month), followed by internists (10 per month), cardiologists (9 per month), pediatricians (8 per month), surgeons (4 per month), and anesthesiologists (2 per month).”

“Our data show that physician–[drug] industry relationships are common in medicine.”

“With regard to peer influence in particular, our findings suggest that industry may focus marketing efforts on physicians who are perceived as influencing the prescribing behaviors of other physicians.”

“Cardiologists, whose prescribing patterns as specialists and opinion leaders are thought to influence the prescribing patterns of nonspecialists, are significantly more likely to receive direct payments from companies than are physicians in other specialties.”

There is a "higher frequency of [drug] industry payments to physicians who have developed clinical practice guidelines."

In 2000, the average number of meetings between physicians and drug industry representatives was 4.4 per month. This study showed an elevated average to 16 meetings per month. The reason for this 400% increase in meeting rates "may reflect an intensification of [drug] industry marketing since the 1990s."

A limitation of this study is that the "respondents may have underreported their associations with [drug] industry, a phenomenon known in the survey literature as social desirability bias."

This study confirms that there is a high prevalence of physician–drug industry relationships.

KEY POINTS FROM DAN MURPHY

- 1) This study shows that most physicians (94%) have some type of relationship with the drug industry. Because "respondents may have underreported their associations with [drug] industry," the relationship between physicians and drug companies is probably higher than the 94% documented in this study.
- 2) Physician benefits from drug companies include receiving free drug samples, free meals, free tickets to events, free travel from drug companies, financial benefits from drug companies, reimbursement for costs associated with professional meetings or continuing medical education, payments for consulting, payments for giving lectures, and payments for enrolling patients in drug clinical trials.
- 3) "Family practitioners reported the highest average number of meetings with [drug] industry representatives (16 meetings per month), followed by internists (10 per month), cardiologists (9 per month), pediatricians (8 per month), surgeons (4 per month), and anesthesiologists (2 per month)."
- 4) The drug industry may focus marketing efforts on "physicians who are perceived as influencing the prescribing behaviors of other physicians."
- 5) There is a "higher frequency of [drug] industry payments to physicians who have developed clinical practice guidelines."
- 6) In 2000, the average number of meetings between physicians and drug industry representatives was 4.4 per month. This study showed an elevated average to 16 meetings per month. The reason for this 400% increase in meeting rates "may reflect an intensification of [drug] industry marketing since the 1990s."