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Letter to the editor

Doctor combats pull of drug reps

He's in the lead of a drive to curtail effects of industry freebies.

By KRIS HUNDLEY, Times Staff Writer

Published December 27, 2007

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Special report



[Carrie Pratt | Times]

Dr. James Orlowski, left, of University Community Hospital in Tampa talks this month with Lindsay Fox, a student physician from Nova Southeastern University.

James P. Orlowski may not be the only doctor in the Tampa Bay area who has given pharmaceutical sales reps the boot.

But he's the only one listed in the online directory of No Free Lunch (www.nofreelunch.org), an organization opposed to accepting freebies from the pharmaceutical industry.

That means Orlowski, chief of pediatrics at Tampa's University Community Hospital, rejects all drug company

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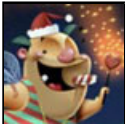


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goodies, from free pens to expensive dinners. By doing so, he's rebuffing a well-oiled marketing machine that spends about \$7.2-billion a year wooing doctors and another \$18-billion on sample drugs.

Pharmaceutical salespeople, known as drug detailers, generally soft-pedal their spiel, casting themselves as trusted resources for both research and free medicines. But when they talk to doctors, well-trained reps know exactly how much of their product the doctors have prescribed in the past. The reps' goal is simple: increase it.

Orlowski said that when he was a struggling medical student at Case Western Reserve 33 years ago, no one discussed the ethics of accepting drug company gifts, and freebies like medical instruments and textbooks were hard to resist.

"Then I saw research that showed these gifts have tremendous influence on prescribing practices, though physicians always deny it," Orlowski said. "There's no way I was going to let a drug company gift influence my decisionmaking."

Orlowski refuses to see drug reps and has refused to let the American Medical Association sell personal information that makes it possible for pharmaceutical companies to track his prescribing habits.

What's more, Orlowski, 60, has used his position to influence University Community Hospital's policy regarding pharmaceutical reps. Where they once wandered freely through its halls, dispensing doughnuts and free lunches, drug reps are now restricted to certain areas of the hospital and are not allowed to approach students, doctors or nurses or host lunches.

Orlowski also tries to instill a wariness of pharmaceutical reps in the medical students who rotate through his department. A recent survey of all U.S. medical schools by the American Medical Student Association found that only five institutions completely restrict drug reps' access to their campuses and hospitals.

The University of South Florida's College of Medicine, which reportedly is in the process of drafting a policy regarding student interaction with drug reps, received a "C" from the group.

Orlowski, who mentors students from USF as well as Nova Southeastern College of Medicine in Fort Lauderdale, said he often finds pharmaceutical companies' pens in students' pockets.

"I ask them if their interactions with drug reps are in the best interests of patients or if they help them in the practice of medicine," he said. "I believe the answer is no."

Though Orlowski was an early opponent of pharmaceutical marketing, there is a growing sensitivity to the issue among doctors in private practice, hospitals and medical schools.

"Read my lips. No new taxes."

George H.W. Bush

Business News Video



Britain's Top Toy? a Mechanical Dragon Fly



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Bush Signs Tax Break for Struggling Homeowners

Research has repeatedly shown that even inexpensive giveaways like coffee mugs create a sense of obligation and influence prescribing habits. According to a study that appeared earlier this year in the journal of the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology, "Even small gifts produce in their recipients a disproportionately powerful willingness to reciprocate in some manner."

While free samples might seem to help patients initially, they also result in doctors prescribing expensive brands over generics which may be just as effective. And "research" on new products provided by drug reps is often biased and incomplete. "Free information is worth about that," said Orłowski, who relies on the independent publication *Medical Letter* for drug research.

Rob Restuccia, executive director of the Prescription Project in Boston, said the billions spent on drug marketing to doctors undermine professionalism, increase cost and undermine care.

"From all angles, it's an important issue that is symptomatic of a lot of problems in the health care system overall," he said. "And it's essentially gone unregulated."

The intensity of the industry's marketing blitz was tracked recently by a member of the National Physicians Alliance, a 10,000-member group that supports a ban on all gifts.

Over a six-week period, the doctor, an internist in Minnesota, turned down 12 free breakfasts, 18 lunches, 16 branded pens, a branded eyeglasses cleaner, two branded pen lanyards, branded pill holders, Post-it Notes, notepads, a pocket Physicians Desk Reference, correction paper strips, a coffee mug, a poster, a highlighter, a diagnostic manual, a giant clip-refrigerator magnet, a ruler, a water-oil globe, a History of Viagra book and a Viagra soap dispenser.

About a dozen states, including Minnesota and Vermont, require drug companies to disclose gifts to doctors. Earlier this year, Sens. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, and Herb Kohl, D-Wis., introduced a bill that would make such reporting mandatory nationwide. Florida has no law or pending legislation to require drug companies to report physician gifts.

"Normally I don't like seeing the government get involved," Orłowski said. "But this type of public exposure is likely to influence doctors."

Kris Hundley can be reached at hundley@sptimes.com or (727) 892-2996.

GRADING FLORIDA'S MEDICAL SCHOOLS

The grades rank how well the schools restrict access by drug reps to school campuses and affiliated hospitals.

Grade C+ (no formal policy but industry reps not allowed to interact with students per administration):

- University of Florida College of Medicine
- Nova Southeastern University College of Medicine

Grade C (School in process of drafting policy)

- University of South Florida College of Medicine

Grade D (No policy but discussions about creating policy)

- Florida State University College of Medicine
- University of Miami Miller School of Medicine

Source: American Medical Student Association

BY THE NUMBERS

- \$7.2-billion** Amount drug companies spend on marketing to doctors (excluding sample drugs)
- \$18-billion** Amount spent on sample medications
- \$13,000** Drug marketing spending per doctor

Source: New England Journal of Medicine

[Last modified December 27, 2007, 01:31:11]

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Comments on this article

by Terry

12/28/07 04:34 PM

Now this is a doctor even I might be able to trust! I hope many other physicians follow his lead. Those posting about free pens are obviously not in the same class of docs as the numerous documented cases where docs receive mega-bucks annually.

by Debra

12/28/07 01:48 PM

We need more docs with this kind of integrity. AND, Congress & FCC need to ban TV & other direct-to-consumer advertising for prescription meds. Anyone with 1/2 a brain knows the consumer can't just go to the drugstore to buy this stuff!

by James

12/28/07 09:37 AM

Does the term lobbyist ring a bell? It's been going on in Washington for years. Of course they're ALL immune to the influence. And I'm the Pope!!!

by tom

12/27/07 11:25 PM

I am rep in a different field. Lunchs give me an opportunity to share with a busy doc the advances of my products. I don't think me spending \$ out of my pocket is harmful if the doc uses the device and it helps you to recover sooner.

by Rick

12/27/07 11:10 PM

Pills, shills, and frills -- that's what BigPharma reps are all about. Big Pharma is as corrupt an entity as you will ever see. Perhaps it is time to send all those Big Pharma reps to see the woman from the big cat rescue place!

by Dr. M

12/27/07 10:55 PM

It's about time the Newspaper wrote something like this...everybody should read the book "overdosed america" It's written by an MD and several "retired" drug reps...one story a rep w/a degree in political science was constantly asked by Dr's what they

by Dr. M**12/27/07 10:55 PM**

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by Jack**12/27/07 10:32 PM**

This Doc's got a white knight complex. If he's so concerned that a few free BIC pens and Post-it note pads are going to influence their treatment protocols, he should lecture his peers on ethics, not the drug companies.

by Ray**12/27/07 09:21 PM**

I went to the doctor recently and there was 5 drug reps in the lobby, I was prescribed 4 drugs before my tests were completed. I left the office and never went back. Found a real doctor and am taking 1 medicine for my diabetes am doing fine.

by Tom**12/27/07 07:43 PM**

Thanks to Dr.Orlowski for his decision. How about the rest of the Medical community, they know this is not right to take these thngs from Big Drug Companies for prescribing their drugs.

by Eddie**12/27/07 07:17 PM**

Marketing reps are lower than pond scum. What is the value of a human life against making an immoral, dishonest buck? Focus on research finding cures rather than bribing honest. caring professionals with worthless 'gifts'. Thank you Dr. Orlowski!

by David**12/27/07 07:02 PM**

My office overlooks the Doc next door. We watch in amazement as these drug vendors parade daily carrying deli platters, gifts, followed by ice cream truck and hot dog cart. I go to this doc- and can never get a generic anything. What a fool I am!

by Just me**12/27/07 05:02 PM**

You can always tell "the drug of choice" as some doctors are so quick with the pen and it seems like some sort of "kick back" is there. My old doc was pushing cholestrol meds, mine is very slight high w/superb ratio's,you cant convince me to take it.

by Just me**12/27/07 04:54 PM**

EXCELLENT!!! Just wish more doctors would do that. Takes a honest person to stand up to these drug pusher reps!!

by wazzamattaU**12/27/07 04:06 PM**

This is nothing new. It used to be called 'bribes' or 'kickbacks', and it was unethical. Wait- it still is!

by James**12/27/07 03:49 PM**

Kudos to the doc. The numbers do not mention what they pay for TV ads. Who is the public to decide what drug is good for them? That is what a doc is for. Ban TV/radio ads and there might be a shot at reestablishing credibility

by C**12/27/07 03:37 PM**

I never thought much about this. When you go to the doctor's office you see all kinds of items from drug companies. It's sad if doctor's are prescibing medicine based on who gives the best gifts.

by Rob**12/27/07 03:14 PM**

Now that's a good honest man & DR!!

by wazzamattaU**12/27/07 03:08 PM**

This used to be called 'bribes' or 'kickbacks', and it was unethical; still is!

by Jeff**12/27/07 02:19 PM**

Believe it or not, drug reps are highly educated in specialties that your doctor might not even be aware of. I like getting free meds from my doctor when I go see him too. Reps are highly trained professionals that truly help doctors.

- by mike** **12/27/07 01:33 PM**
I've seen first hand how doctors have ruined lives of patients by prescribing drugs they dont need;until they become addicted.most doctors are worst than street dealers.
- by Jack** **12/27/07 01:30 PM**
I'm a family physician, and I too don't see reps. I disagree with Mike - I take time to read to stay informed. "Detailers" do not have the patient's best interest and will tell you ANYTHING to sell their product (like Vioxx won't hurt your pts heart)
- by Dave** **12/27/07 01:15 PM**
Bravo Dr. Orlowski If all of the medical community subscribed to your philosophy the cost of prescriptions should decrease, what a great thing for the seniors caught in the medicare D "doughnut hole", or the ones skipping meds to eat or vice versa.
- by Helen** **12/27/07 12:35 PM**
Mike, if you know physicians you would also know that big pharma will supply the entire office with a free lunch at least once a week, on top of other "freebies". Who pays for this? Us, via insurance premiums. Time for it to STOP!
- by Lynn** **12/27/07 12:09 PM**
This is great, hope it slows down the distribution of oxycontin by Purdue Pharma, their reps are pushing way too much, its killing our kids every day.
- by Christina** **12/27/07 11:49 AM**
What about baby formula reps? Are they included? Doctors say breastfeeding is best, but then they hand out free formula. Medical professionals sending a mixed message doesn't help new moms.
- by PFG** **12/27/07 11:34 AM**
AMEN! A DR.THAT ACTUALLY CARES ABOUT TRUE PATIENT CARE AND NOT THE GOOD OL'DOLLAR BILL!!
- by Bucfan** **12/27/07 10:52 AM**
My doc said they send a hot looking female "detailer" to promote Levitra!
- by Joe** **12/27/07 10:25 AM**
the real problem is the direct to consumer advertising that these companies do.
- by Joe** **12/27/07 10:21 AM**
most businesses in the US do this. last i checked the drug co. are businesses that are in it to make money. why are they any different than say a microsoft? the only ones that save \$ are the drug co. they put the \$ right back in their pocket.
- by Tony** **12/27/07 10:18 AM**
It tells you something when drug companies spend more money on marketing than on research and development. All about the money in our health care system. What a sham! The U.S. is ranked 37th in the world in health care behind Albania!
- by Mike** **12/27/07 10:05 AM**
I disagree. I have several friends who are physicians and they do not have the time to learn/keep up with the ever changing science. With reimbursement so low and family obligations, they view the detailers as a resource for learning new science.
- by John** **12/27/07 09:38 AM**
Kudos to Dr. Orlowski (and Kris Hundley for this article. Visit jibiab and "Medicine We Need" for a humorous view of this disease that is helping to bankrupt medicare.
- by Lane** **12/27/07 08:59 AM**
Good for you doc. We need more like you. Maybe then health care would be more affordable for everyone.
- by Steve** **12/27/07 08:59 AM**

How much of the \$13,000 is included in the salary of the rep. How much of the marketing money is spent on commercials trying to sway the public. And please, don't try to convince us that the samples actually cost \$18 billion. That figure is misleading

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