



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Pharmacists' and physicians' perception and exposure to drug promotion: A Saudi study



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KEYWORDS

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Abstract *Introduction:* Drug promotion has to contribute to a more rational use of drugs. Concerns arise if promotion negatively influences prescribing/dispensing pattern. It is warranted to assess exposure and attitudes to, and acceptance of, drug promotion among pharmacists and physicians.

Methodology: Adopting a randomized, multiple site and cross-sectional survey study, questionnaires ($n = 250$) were completed by physicians and pharmacists to investigate the exposure, acceptance or skepticism of Saudi physicians/pharmacists to drug promotion as well as their perception of the appropriateness of gifts and to check if they had any teaching/training about dealing with medical representatives (MRs) and Pharma promotion.

Results: Significantly more pharmacists than physicians (32% vs. 23%; $p < 0.05$) reported being taught or educated about the ethics of drug promotion. The experience level was significantly associated with the teaching or training that the physicians and pharmacists received. Conference registration fees and drug samples were the most appropriate promotional gift for the physicians (67% and 66%, respectively; $p < 0.01$) whereas for pharmacists, the drug sample was considered the most suitable donation (79%). More pharmacists perceived drug companies as a useful way to gain knowledge about drugs than physicians (75% vs. 65%; $p < 0.01$). A higher proportion of both groups were accepting drug promotion than those skeptical about it.

Conclusion: The majority of physicians or pharmacists participating in this study have received gifts from pharmaceutical companies. The drug samples and printed educational materials are the

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most widely accepted gifts. Recent graduates and those with few years of experience had higher teaching/training than experienced physicians and pharmacists in pharmaceutical promotion ethics and tactics to deal with MRs. On the other hand, experienced healthcare team were more approached and targeted by pharmaceutical companies and MRs. It is highly recommended to implement courses/discussion groups on the ethical interaction between healthcare professionals and pharmaceutical companies in the curriculum of both pharmacy and medicine. Updating the physicians and pharmacists after graduation, as part of continued medical/pharmacy education, will eventually improve the healthcare professionals' capability to act to the patients' welfare.

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1. Introduction

Drug promotion refers to all informational and persuasive endeavours by manufacturers and distributors, ultimately leading to provoke the supply, purchase and/or use of medications (WHO, 1998). Drug promotion has been suggested so that healthcare professionals have access to information they need about medicine and that medicines are prescribed and used in the welfare and benefit of patients.

It was estimated that the pharmaceutical promotion and marketing expenditure in the USA, in 2000 was \$15.7 billion which was 20–30% of sales turnover and 2- to 3-times that of research and development (National Institute for Health Care Management, 2001). Half of this expenditure is directed to the price of medicine samples (50.3%) and detailing visits to physicians (25.5%).

Physicians prescribe drug products that are called “prescription drugs” whereas the pharmacists dispense non-prescription drugs or “over-the counter medications; OTC”. The detailing visits of medical representatives (MRs) to physicians and pharmacists combined with other promotional activities such as gifts, sponsored meetings and advertising might affect the attitudes towards the drug company and its medical products.

Communications and interactions between pharmaceutical companies and physicians/pharmacists regarding drug promotion and marketing have been lately the focus of interest from an ethical point of view. These interactions are pervasive and often influential and beneficial for the patient but they may turn into some undesirable consequences (Hall et al., 2006). Concerns are about if drug promotion is inducing doctors to prescribe specific drugs, if it is driving pharmacists to dispense expensive drugs when less expensive drugs might be better in some cases, and if it leads to the inappropriate clinical use of some drugs (Lexchin, 1993).

Previous research indicated that doctors/pharmacists who receive gifts are more positive towards the company and more likely to prescribe/dispense the company's products (Ashker and Burkiewicz, 2007; Banks and Mainous, 1992; Brett et al., 2003). It has been suggested that physicians who rely on drug company information, through drug detailers (MRs) or promotional literature, prefer expensive brands, adopt newer medicines more quickly, show more inappropriate prescribing and write more prescriptions than their colleagues (Lexchin, 1993). Ethical concerns have been raised about the impact that the pharmaceutical companies may have on physicians and pharmacists and the outcome it could bring on their prescribing and dispensing practice if they got used

to receiving gifts (Adair and Holmgren, 2005; Brett et al., 2003) and growing positive attitudes and a feeling of commitment towards pharmaceutical companies (Rogers et al., 2004; Rosner, 2000; Wazana, 2000). A very recent Saudi study by Alosaimi et al. indicated that gift acceptance is familiar for physicians working in Saudi Arabia (Alosaimi et al., 2013). We expanded this by comparing the perception of physicians and pharmacists towards gifts from Pharma Industry.

The aim of the present study is to investigate the exposure, acceptance or skepticism of physicians/pharmacists to drug promotion as well as their perception of the appropriateness of gifts and to determine if physicians/pharmacists (especially the new graduates) have had any teaching/training during their study about dealing with medical representatives and Pharma promotion.

2. Methodology

2.2. Survey development and distribution

A self-administered questionnaire was developed both in paper as well as in electronic form (attached; Appendix A) (https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1h3ww_Vu5W8fGbKazt8v0KV8oM9IeTjS-pGSPKuQv07Y/viewform). The survey was conducted from September to November 2013. Results were anonymous, all items are obligatory to fill. Completion of the survey was tracked with 3 reminders sent out at approximately 3-week interval. Physicians and pharmacists were queried on 5 drug promotion-related issues namely: (1) demographic information about the physician/pharmacist (age, gender, nationality and residence); (2) exposure to training about drug company promotion and interactions, and encounters with pharmaceutical representatives; (3) exposure to different drug company interactions and gifts and the number of times they participated in these interactions; (4) perceptions of appropriateness of various drug company gifts assessed on a 12 item, 3-point scale (appropriate, inappropriate, and neutral); and (5) attitudes about pharmaceutical promotion measured as agreement with 9 statements (5 revealing acceptance of drug promotion and 4 revealing skepticism) on a 3-point scale (agree, disagree, and neutral).

2.3. Study design

The design was a randomized, multiple site and cross-sectional survey. The study conformed to the ethical principles of the

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