

# Teaching Medical Students to Develop an 'Appropriate' Relationship with the Pharmaceutical Industry

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In recent years the level of interaction between doctors, medical students and the pharmaceutical industry has been increasing. A large survey conducted in the United States (US) found over 90% of physicians reported some type of relationship with the pharmaceutical industry<sup>1</sup>. Both in developing and developed countries pharmaceutical companies seek to influence medical students as doctors in training and form relationships which will be sustained and developed throughout the doctor's career. Students receiving gifts may feel they have to reciprocate a favor which can influence their future prescribing<sup>2</sup>. The World Health Organization (WHO) has published the 'Ethical criteria for medicinal drug promotion' (<http://apps.who.int/medicinedocs/documents/whozip08e/whozip08e.pdf>) to educate students about the promotional activities of pharmaceutical companies. Recently WHO and Health Action International (HAI) have produced a manual on 'Understanding and responding to pharmaceutical promotion' (<http://www.haiweb.org/11062009/drug-promotion-manual-CAP-3-090610.pdf>) which could be used to educate health science students.

In 2005, an international cross-sectional survey found many health professions schools around the world had a certain amount of teaching about pharmaceutical promotion but devoted less than four hours to teaching this important topic. Educational initiatives about pharmaceutical promotion are not very common in South Asian medical schools. Educating medical students about pharmaceutical promotion is an important challenge for medical education and educators in the region<sup>3</sup>.

In Nepal, an educational initiative conducted at the Manipal College of Medical Sciences (MCOMS) critically examined pharmaceutical promotion<sup>4</sup>. Students were introduced to different promotional strategies employed by the industry and critically analyzed drug advertisements in medical journals against the WHO ethical criteria. At KIST Medical College (KISTMC), Lalitpur, Nepal students learn to critically analyze drug advertisements and other promotional material, optimize time spend with medical representatives (MRs) and become familiar with independent sources of medicine information<sup>5</sup>. Student opinion about the sessions was positive. At the same institution, a module titled 'The Skeptic doctor' was conducted for second year medical students from April to August 2011<sup>6</sup> using the WHO-HAI manual. Student opinion about the session was positive. Activities related to pharmaceutical promotion form part of the assessment during the pharmacology practical examination at KISTMC. Previously I had visited many medical schools in Nepal as an external examiner in pharmacology. Activities related to pharmaceutical promotion do not form part of the assessment during the practical examination in most schools. Certain faculty members who were previously associated with the

department of Pharmacology at MCOMS, Pokhara have conducted sessions on pharmaceutical promotion at other medical schools like Nepalgunj Medical College and College of Medical Sciences at Bharatpur.

In Nepal recently there has been a tremendous growth in the pharmaceutical industry and medicines and medical devices are aggressively promoted to doctors. Medical students are increasingly targeted and many medical student functions are sponsored by pharmaceutical companies. A recent article emphasizes the fact that doctors should be aware of the influence of the industry and have the knowledge and means to resist industry influence<sup>7</sup>. A recent survey conducted in Germany found medical students had extensive contact with the pharmaceutical industry and concluded the medical school curriculum should teach about the strategies drug companies use to influence medical students<sup>8</sup>. Another article examined a series of lectures on the pharmacotherapy of pain in Canada which contained questionable content about the use of opioids for pain management<sup>9</sup>. The lectures were sponsored by a pharmaceutical company and conducted by a guest lecturer who was a member of the speakers' bureau of companies. A survey found over 91.2% of medical students had exposure to pharmaceutical marketing, and 56.8% of students were exposed to all classes of marketing methods<sup>10</sup>. Deliberate targeting of students by pharmaceutical representatives correlated with being less sensitive to the negative effects of and having positive opinions about interactions with pharmaceutical companies. The authors concluded students are exposed to drug marketing in primary care settings, and may become more vulnerable to that strategy.

Considering the studies reported in the literature and trends in developed nations, teaching students about pharmaceutical promotion and how to deal with it should be an important part of the medical school curriculum. Appropriate interaction of doctors in the teaching hospital with MRs is essential as they serve as role models for students and as a strong influence on their future behavior. The hospital drug/medicine and therapeutics committee has an important role to play in this regard. The HAI-WHO manual on pharmaceutical promotion can be used as a guide for conducting sessions for students. Sensitizing students about pharmaceutical promotion and helping them develop an 'appropriate' relationship during their professional career is the need of the hour!

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