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Data mining should get the shaft

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That it's called "data mining" is bad enough.

That it is the equivalent of utter strangers rooting around in your medicine cabinet just gives me the willies. But pharmaceutical companies have been doing it for years: buying, or "mining," data that track what doctors prescribe to us, then using that information to push their products on our docs.

"Well, we know that you prescribe a lot of Paxil," a drug rep might say, "so how about trying our version?"

Not so fast, said Dr. Rupin Thakkar, an Edmonds pediatrician who is supporting the Prescription Privacy Bill, which is being considered in Olympia.

"Data mining is absolutely an invasion of the doctor-patient relationship," Thakkar said Monday. "It's almost as though the drug reps are in the exam room with you."

Thakkar has long refused to meet with drug reps. Nevertheless, he once received a note from one who said she noticed he was prescribing a lot of medication for pinkeye, and would he like to try her company's antibiotic?

"I thought, 'How could she know what I had been prescribing?' "

Drug companies are able to track the prescribing habits of the country's more than 600,000 doctors through the insurance claims processed by pharmacies. The processed claims are coded with physician ID numbers issued by the Drug Enforcement Agency.

Pharmaceutical companies buy that claim information from pharmacies and clearinghouses, then match the ID numbers with lists of doctors that they buy from the federal government and the American Medical Association.

Voilà! Drug reps are able to download prescription information and doctors' names right onto their laptops, then get out there and sell.

They are even able to drop the names of other doctors who write similar scrips — but have never met the drug rep.

So what do we get out of it?

Nothing but a wider opening on our proverbial hospital gown. As patients, we are more exposed, and more vulnerable to new drugs that are often pricier, and not always safer. Remember Vioxx? Marketed like crazy, then pulled off the shelves a few years ago over concerns of increased heart attacks and strokes.

The Prescription Privacy Bill is being supported by the Washington Coalition for Prescribing Integrity and the Healthy Washington Coalition.

But pharmaceutical companies are fighting hard, saying that losing access to data would force them to spend even more on marketing — a cost they would have no choice but to pass on to us.

"Getting rid of the data makes it less efficient for the pharmaceutical industry to have targeted marketing campaigns," said Julie Corcoran, of the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America. "We'd need to blanket 10,000 doctors to make sure 1,000 get that information.

"It could make it less efficient, and more costly."

Thakkar called that "a false argument."

"All they need to know," he said, "is what kind of doctor you are."

Any more than that is none of their business. Only ours.