

What is a Drug Rep?

Pharmaceutical companies employ armies of salespeople, also known as “drug reps,” who visit doctors and other health care providers to share promotional information on new products. This practice is known as “detailing.” In the US, there is approximately 1 rep for every 5 doctors.

While some have a medical or scientific background, many do not. In fact, the *New York Times* reported recently that many drug reps are recruited from cheerleading squads for their charisma and enthusiasm.ⁱ Drug reps are well paid, with an average salary plus bonuses around US\$74,000.ⁱⁱ Many receive commissions based on the number of prescriptions “their” doctors write for the promoted drugs.

i: Stephanie Saul, “Gimme an Rx”, *New York Times*, November 28, 2005

ii: Salary.com, accessed 1/21/2008



The Unbranded Doctor Campaign of the National Physicians Alliance represents a network of physicians across America who believe that medical offices should not accept or display free promotional products from industry salespeople. Even small gifts have been shown to influence medical decision-making and undermine best practice.

To join our campaign, visit www.npalliance.org.

To learn more:

National Physicians Alliance

www.npalliance.org

The Prescription Project

www.prescriptionproject.org

American Medical Student Association

www.amsa.org

THE UNBRANDED DOCTOR

Why Doesn't My Doctor See Drug Reps? Information for Patients



Drug Reps and Your Doctor

What Do Drug Reps Do?

Drug reps visit doctors in their offices, often weekly and commonly unannounced. Their goal is to boost company sales. They provide product information that often exaggerates the benefits and downplays the side effects of medicines. They also distribute free product samples. Almost always, they tout the newest, most expensive treatments. While this may suggest to you that drug reps help keep doctors up-to-date, it may not be a good thing. The newest brand of drug may be just an expensive version of an older, proven and **generic** drug that works just as well (or better). The newest medicines also lack a safety track record. Consider the case of *Vioxx*, which quickly became one of the most commonly prescribed painkillers before it was withdrawn from the market.

- Provide doctors with free pens, notepads and other items bearing company logos or brand name of drug
- Provide free lunch or dinner for doctors and/or their staffs

Gifts: “There Is No Such Thing As A Free Lunch”

There is no such thing as a free lunch. The cost of all these lunches is added to the advertising budget of the pharmaceutical company, which gets its money from you, the health care consumer or taxpayer. How can a pen and a cheap sandwich influence your doctor? First, remember, when someone gives you a gift, you feel inclined to reciprocate in some way. This is human nature. While many doctors reject the idea that little trinkets influence their prescribing behavior, research has shown that they do.ⁱ The investment suggests this as well: would pharmaceutical companies, which are second only to the oil industry in profitabilityⁱⁱ, spend billions of dollars each year on these promotions if they didn't see a return on their investment?

While the days may be gone when doctors received airline tickets, resort vacations, or hard cash from drug reps, 94% of doctors still accept incentive “gifts” from the pharmaceutical industry.ⁱⁱⁱ And many still do receive all expense paid trips to fancy locations for “educational” events, or receive hundreds or even thousands of dollars for “consulting” arrangements that often require little work on their part. This is marketing packaged as education.

Your doctors are human, and just as susceptible to advertising as anyone else. Furthermore, some drug reps keep files on their doctors' personal information (what sport does he like? what is her spouse's name?) in order to forge a relationship that is perceived as friendship, but serves the overall purpose of the sale. In addition, drug reps have access to data that tells them exactly how much of their product and the competing medicines each doctor prescribes, and they adjust their sales pitches accordingly.

Talk to Your Doctor

Our practice is following the lead of a number of large hospitals and medical societies in adopting this policy. We believe it is in the best interest of our patients to limit the influence of marketing on medical decision-making. We are happy to talk with you about it.

i: Hodges, B. Canadian Medical Association Journal 153: 553-9.

ii: Fortune Magazine's Fortunes 500, money.cnn.com, accessed 1/21/2008

iii: Eric Campbell, New Engl J Med, 2007