

The gift that keeps on giving – to the drug industry

Arthur Schafer, Winnipeg

A recent *Free Press* story (*Crackdown demanded on drug reps' 'freebies', Nov. 24*) describes a minor scandal in which a drug company gift was misused by a Winnipeg nurse in such a way that patients were exposed to the risks of HIV and Hep C infection.

Lurking behind this minor scandal, however, is a major scandal — one that threatens the very soul of modern medicine, though neither the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority nor the University of Manitoba Faculty of Medicine has done anything significant to remediate the problem.

Modern medicine floats on a sea of drug and device company money. Some of that money funds medical research and, when it does, the companies count on the research to be favourable to its products. Some of the money goes to gifts for physicians, who are frequently induced by these gifts (often without realizing it) to prescribe expensive drugs of dubious benefit; and some of it goes for free samples of drugs and medical devices which the company representatives leave with doctors.

Occasionally, when a scandal surfaces involving these gifts — investments, really — the public briefly becomes aware of the dangers that come with a system that allows Big Pharma to educate doctors about new drugs and then prescribe them.

For many years, the drug industry in Canada has been spending tens, even hundreds of millions of dollars annually plying doctors with samples. Both medical journals and marketing journals are replete with studies showing how effectively this tactic works. But the WRHA, apparently, is only now beginning to realize that such tactics can have very negative effects on medical practice. Manitobans might wonder why the WRHA does not already have strong ethical policies in place to protect patients against the malign effects of such practices.

I say “malign” because you can be certain that the free samples are the newest, least well-tested products. Invariably, they are also the most expensive. The companies employ a legion of representatives who visit the doctors at work. The “reps” happily provide such freebies as catered lunches for the entire office staff as a gesture of appreciation for “face time” with the doctors and nurses. In the hospitals, the coffee and donuts or the beer and pizza served before or after drug lectures by distinguished academic experts are provided courtesy of reps. The experts, referred to by the industry as KOLs — key opinion leaders — typically will be remunerated for speaking about the products of the sponsoring company.

As a result of company generosity, almost every drawer, filing cabinet and closet in our public hospitals and clinics is overflowing with free drug samples and medical devices. Patients generally feel grateful when their doctor offers them a free sample of a new drug. Seldom does the patient realize that this is a come-on — the expectation is that when the free sample has been used up the patient will ask the doctor to prescribe the drug and will then purchase it.

Free samples were an important part of the process by which millions of Canadians suffering from arthritic pain came to be taking such COX 2 inhibitors as Vioxx and Celebrex. These expensive new drugs were no better at controlling pain than over-the-counter pain medications but they significantly increased the risks of heart attacks, strokes and blood clots.

After more than 50,000 Americans died from Vioxx-induced heart attacks and strokes and another 100,000 suffered health problems, Vioxx was withdrawn from the market. Celebrex is still available, although in America it carries a Black Box warning.

Free samples are a powerful marketing tool for the industry and they have helped to power many drugs, such as Lipitor (to lower cholesterol), Prozac (for depression), and Avandia (for diabetes) into billion dollar a year status.

Often it turns out that these drugs have fewer benefits than claimed but much higher rates of dangerous side effects. When you watch advertisements on American TV (they are supposed to be forbidden in Canada but the government scarcely enforces the prohibition) you might feel amazement at how many of the products require the announcer to list a string of potentially dire effects: heart disease, strokes, blindness, diarrhoea, the list goes on.

If the images were not so seductive, the warnings would surely put off any sane person from consuming these “wonder” drugs. Yet, somehow, people take away the message that their lives will go better if they consume ever-increasing numbers of pills.

It’s time the WRHA, in concert with hospitals and the faculty of medicine to take decisive action in defence of physician integrity. Strong moral leadership is needed. It’s time for doctors and other health care professionals to recognize the applicability of the old saying, “there is no such thing as a free lunch.” Accepting gifts or other benefits (including free samples) from drug companies and their representatives carries a heavy ethical price, namely, the sacrifice of professional integrity.

*Arthur Schafer is director of the Centre for Professional and Applied Ethics at the University of Manitoba*