

Glaxo changes sales and promotion strategy: Good or bad?

By ACSH Staff — December 17, 2013



The promotion of drugs to doctors has been a hot button issue

for quite some time. But now, GlaxoSmithKline CEO Andrew Witty may be leading the pharmaceutical industry in a very different direction.

Two separate, but related practices are being instituted by the company: 1) Glaxo will no longer pay doctors to promote their drugs, something that has been a sore point for industry critics, who claim that this is a clear conflict of interest. This will apply especially to conferences and symposia, where payments to presenters can be considerable.

The company will also stop tying sales representatives performance to the number of prescriptions written by the doctors that the rep visits. Although not explicitly mentioned, another tactic sometimes used by reps has been highly controversial the promotion of an approved drug for off-label use, which is illegal (sharing scholarly articles on off-label uses is allowed, within strict limits). There have been scandals and criminal prosecutions for this practice.

While this may seem to be a win-win situation, it is a bit more nuanced than it appears.

ACSH's Dr. Josh Bloom says, I can certainly see why people have problems with the compensation of doctors at meetings. Although this is not necessarily a conflict of interest, it is not unreasonable to at least suspect that it might be. Yet, when novel, game-changing drugs are discovered (for example, the new generation of hepatitis C drugs) it is far more important for the information to be disseminated than worrying about potential conflict of interest. Yet, there is a huge gray area here, which Glaxo's new rules will eliminate.

Whether this will influence public opinion of the industry remains to be seen, and although it is wise to tighten up potential ethical matters, there is a downside.

Dr. Bloom, who wrote an [op-ed](#) ^[1] on the interaction of sales reps and doctors, notes, Most doctors do not have the time or inclination to keep up with the medical literature, and their main source of information on new drugs often comes from sales rep office visits. This is, unfortunately, a function of being a doctor in an age where paperwork and constant fighting with insurance companies occupies far too much of their time.

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