

Gifts to doctors wield undue influence in France

Numerous studies, in various countries, have demonstrated the influence of gifts on doctors' prescribing behaviour (1,2). They have shown that the influence is often subconscious and that awareness of the influence of gifts is not sufficient to make the recipient immune to this effect. These studies also confirm something long known to the sales and marketing professions: "small" gifts, especially meals, are particularly effective (1,2).

Are French doctors immune to the influence of gifts?

Harmful association between gifts and prescribing behaviour. A team from Rennes, France, sought to measure the influence of gifts on the prescribing patterns of general practitioners (3). To achieve this, the authors linked two types of data for the year 2016: on one hand, the monetary value of the gifts the doctors received, as declared in the database transparence.sante.gouv.fr; and on the other, data from the national health insurance system, showing the cost of the drugs they prescribed, and their compliance with a number of prescribing targets included in France's pay-for-performance programme, called ROSP (3).

The results are clear: there is a harmful association between the gifts doctors received and the quality and cost of their prescriptions. For example, compared with GPs who received no gifts between 2013 and 2016, GPs who received at least one gift in 2016 were less likely on average to prescribe generic versions of statins, anti-hypertensive drugs or antibiotics; and GPs who received gifts in 2016 with a total value of over €240 were on average more likely to prescribe benzodiazepines for longer than 12 weeks, and to prescribe vasodilators (3).

As the authors highlight in their article, an association between gifts and prescribing patterns is not evidence for a causal link. But at the very least, this association indicates that doctors who accept gifts have a certain

general pattern of behaviour, as well as more confidence in what pharmaceutical companies have to say and in new products (3).

There is still denial, but also change. These results, obtained by studying over 41 000 GPs in France, confirm the findings of other studies. They were also foreseeable: why would pharmaceutical companies spend so much money on promotion if it wasn't effective?

Some doctors and the main association representing France's pharmaceutical industry still appear to be in denial, and have contested this study. But others, including the French National College of General Practice Teachers (CNGE), have welcomed it, remarking that (our translation) "the value of the independence of prescribers has once again been demonstrated". In the same press release, the CNGE questioned "the continued existence of pharmaceutical detailing" (4).

Doctors in France, like doctors everywhere, are influenced by marketing. The good news is that increasing numbers of doctors are now aware of this influence, and behaviour is changing: one-third of French GPs received no gifts in 2016 (3).

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Selected references from Prescrire's literature search

- 1- Prescrire Rédaction "Le repas: un cadeau particulièrement influent" *Rev Prescrire* 2018; **38** (416): 456-462.
- 2- Prescrire Rédaction "Marketing et prescription d'opioïdes" *Rev Prescrire* 2019; **39** (430): 625.
- 3- Goupil B et al. "Association between gifts from pharmaceutical companies to French general practitioners and their drug prescribing patterns in 2016: retrospective study using the French Transparency in Healthcare and National Health Data System databases" *BMJ* 2019; **367**: i6015: 9 pages.
- 4- CNGE "Indépendance des médecins: un gage de qualité" Press release 14 November 2019: 1 page.

