

No-gift policy in medical schools

Demonstrated impact on prescribing behaviour



Abstract

● A study has shown that a policy banning pharmaceutical industry gifts in US medical schools has beneficial effects on prescribing behaviour once students enter clinical practice.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that even small gifts from drug companies, such as pens and meals, influence healthcare professionals' prescribing behaviour and their attitude towards the pharmaceutical industry (1). Counterintuitively, a small gift has the potential to influence the recipient more than a large one, specifically because the recipient tends to be unaware of its influence (1).

Various studies have also shown that students have frequent interactions with drug companies which can influence their attitudes, in particular their future prescribing behaviour (2,3). One explanation is that students receive little training to encourage critical thinking and to understand the concept of conflicts of interest during their preclinical or clinical years (4,5).

Medical schools that prohibit industry gifts. A team of US academics studied whether banning gifts from pharmaceutical companies at medical schools affects the subsequent prescribing habits of healthcare professionals (6). This team identified 14 US medical schools that had adopted a gift restriction policy before 2004. They compared the prescriptions issued between July 2008 and March 2009 by doctors who graduated 2 years before the ban was introduced with those issued by doctors who graduated after its implementation (6).

This study concentrated on prescriptions for three of the top-selling and most highly promoted new psychotropic drugs in the US, for which a first-choice alternative already existed: *lisdexamfetamine* (an amphetamine classified as a narcotic in France), *paliperidone* and *desvenlafaxine* (6). The study included several thousand doctors and tens of thousands of prescriptions (6).

Effect observed on the prescription of certain drugs. Doctors who had trained at a university that permitted gifts from pharmaceutical companies issued more prescriptions for *lisdexamfetamine* and *paliperidone* than doctors who had not received industry gifts during their training (6). The longer the doctors were exposed to a gift restriction policy, the less likely they were to prescribe these new drugs (6).

In the case of *desvenlafaxine*, the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant, but the authors did not offer an explanation for this finding (6).

When will medical schools worldwide enact a "no-gift" policy? This study confirmed that the presence of the pharmaceutical industry in institutions that train doctors influences their subsequent prescribing habits. Will universities and leading hospitals worldwide follow this example and enact a policy prohibiting drug company gifts to medical students?

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Selected references from Prescrire's literature search.

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