UNETHICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DOCTORS AND DRUGS COMPANIES

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ABSTRACT

Medicine is a noble profession. The primary aim of medical profession is to render service to humanity. Financial gain is a subordinate consideration.[1] But it has been observed globally that medical practitioners in conjunction with pharmaceutical companies are prescribing and thereby promoting unnecessary drugs just for the sake of monetary gains. This article reviews the salient aspects of the relationship between doctors and drugs companies and its future consequences.

Key words : Medical Ethics, Drug companies, Prescription, MCI, RMP

INTRODUCTION

The interaction between doctors and medical representatives (popularly known as MRs) is almost as old as the medical profession itself. The basic role of a medical representative is to apprise the doctor about his company’s products including the drugs. There is nothing wrong in that as long as the ultimate beneficiary of this information is the patient. After all, continued professional development is an essential component of a good health care system. Even the Medical Council of India expects that every registered medical practitioner should try to up grade his knowledge and skill for the betterment of his patients.[2]

Unfortunately, there is often a conflict between the interests of the patient and those of the doctors as far as the drug promotion is concerned. WHO defines drugs promotion as all informational and persuasive activities by manufacturers, distributors to induce /influence the sale and use of medicinal drugs. Drug promotion has an important bearing on the rational use of drug; on drug -price control mechanism; on equity of drug distribution - all making it a central public health issue. Often, drug promotion strategies adopted by various drug companies are too attractive to be resisted by a doctor. This, in turn, places the interest of the doctors ahead that of the patients. Doctors, who are frequently in contact with medical representatives, are more likely to prescribe newer and expensive drugs of their favourite pharmaceutical companies to achieve their selfish end i.e. to receive more and more financial gain from the companies as cutbacks. In our country, the doctors are held in high esteem by the gullible patients. They are considered second to ‘Gods’ by most patients. Therefore, doctors may prescribe expensive drugs of their favourite pharmaceutical companies with scant regard for the expense borne by the poor patients.[3,4]

Interaction between drug companies and doctors are pervasive. Relationships of doctors with drug companies begin when they are just medical students attending the various clinical OPD’s and wards, continue during internship and residency training, and persist throughout their professional careers.

The Nature and Effect of the Relationships

The drug-companies interact with doctors in order to promote their medical products. They reach out to almost all concerned doctors to attain their goals. The doctors are compensated adequately in the form of gifts and other incentives by drug companies. Consequentially, both the parties are benefitted from this interaction with potential consequences for patients. Few doctors may be morally so stout that they continue to prescribe those medicines that appear to be most beneficial as well as economical to their patients despite being in contact with so many drug companies. The aggressive marketing strategies by the companies just act as tools of information for them. But the prescribing behavior of a vast
majority of the medical community is palpably influenced by pharmaceutical companies. Many physicians believe that their interactions with drug-companies have educational value for themselves and also provide benefits for patients, because physicians are kept informed about available therapeutic agents and the poor patients can be given free drug samples provided by different companies. Some physicians contend that they themselves are invulnerable to any bias as a result of interaction with drug companies.[4,5]

There is a growing consensus among doctors that prescribing more expensive brands of reputed companies of which the quality is assured is far better than prescribing cheaper brands of unknown quality. This may be one of the reasons behind such shoddy prescriptions. But this cannot be generalized. It is open secret that the professional associations depend solely on pharmaceutical companies to sponsor their medical programmes viz., CME's, Conferences, Annual Meeting, Workshops etc. Many junior as well as senior physicians seek sponsorships or financial aids from these companies to attend national as well as International Conferences. Even pleasure- trips within the country and abroad for a few heavyweight doctors and their immediate family members are arranged and funded by some pharmaceutical companies. The doctors, in turn, tend to reciprocate by prescribing medical products of these companies in blatant disregard to patient's welfare. In one study, it was found that there are many different ways by which drug companies relate directly or indirectly with doctors. These range from the seemingly trivial (e.g., the ubiquitous dispensing of gifts such as pens and writing-pads with drug names inscribed) to the much more fascinating gifts (e.g., the ghost writing of articles for teaching faculty, the payment of large sums in cash to prominent physicians who extol the virtues of company products and the support of lavish trips and entertainment for physicians who commonly prescribe company products) [5,6]

A majority of physicians don't consider it unethical to accept such gifts as receipt of pens, pen-stand, pads, calendars, drug samples, company funded lunch or dinner etc at which company's products are favourably mentioned.7

But acceptance of expensive gifts of recreational value rather than professional activities is unethical according to them. Also, they concur not to support medical products of drug companies whose medical representatives furnish biased or self-serving information regarding their products. Even among those doctors who claim that they only prescribe medicines which are most beneficial to their patients irrespective of the fact that they are constantly visited and pressurized by pharmaceutical companies to prescribe their brands only - a substantial body of evidence suggests otherwise. Because when a gift is given, is imposes on a doctor a scene of indebtedness. As an upright man instructed in the art of healing, he may feel inclined to reciprocate resulting in shoddy prescriptions.[5]

As a consequence of the relationship between doctors and drug companies, the credibility of medical profession in the eyes of the patients and the public is ever on the decline.

If a patient gets to know that the doctor is prescribing medical advice on the basis of commercial influence he may lose trust and confidence in the doctor (which are the precursors to any successful treatment). In such a scenario, patients are more likely than doctors to believe that gifts may influence prescribing behavior that is morally inappropriate according to them.[3,4]

CONCLUSION

It is being realized more now than ever before that the interaction between doctors and drug companies should be contained within acceptable boundaries. It would be impracticable to ask the medical professionals to distance themselves from drug companies. The real challenge for the medical profession, drug companies and the Govt. is to formulate mutually acceptable guidelines to avoid certain egregiously unethical medical practice. The ultimate arbiter of this malpractice is of course the medical profession itself. It is for them to decide whether or not to accept the proffered information and gifts by drug companies. For that, medical students should be exposed to the marketing strategies of pharmaceutical companies and the methods to counter them. During MBBS course, the students should be instructed not to depend on drug companies for their professional advancement. As the doctors posted in rural or
remote areas are supposedly not aware of the latest trends in medical practice, they depend on the drug companies for product information. This problem can be obviated if more and more CME's are conducted in those areas by registered medical association so that they can keep pace with emerging medical technology. Professional associations should also strive hard to generate funds so that they can conduct their scientific programmes independently.

Mushrooming of drug companies is also responsible for this unethical medical practice. Since, one drug company in order to surpass another company brings out the same drug at much cheaper price, compromising the quality of the drug. If the retail price and the quality of the drug is regulated and standardized by the Govt. the unethical practice of drug companies can be put in check. But before that we have to understand the dynamics of Indian drug bazaar which not only involves the doctors and the drug companies but also the go-in-betweens like chemist and medical representatives, etc. But then, all said and done, the only pragmatic approach to dealing with this unethical practice is for doctors not to accept anything of financial value from drug companies. Till date apart from the American Medical Association and others, the Indian Medical Association has also expressed its concern over it and made an appeal to the medical community not to accept expensive gifts from pharmaceutical companies.

References