

The Truth  *About Health*

Free Drug Samples All about Marketing

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Providing free drug samples to doctors has long been a basic marketing practice of big pharmaceutical companies. The standard public relations line advanced by drug makers is that doing so helps to get needed drugs into the hands of people who otherwise could not afford them.

In reality, sampling programs are in more ways detrimental than helpful according to researchers Susan Chimonas of the Center on Medicine as a Profession at Columbia University and Jerome Kassirer, a professor at Tufts University School of Medicine. Basically their research found that the practice of handing out free samples is not effective in improving drug access for the indigent, it does not promote intelligent drug use, and it raises drug prices while ultimately increasing the cost of medical care.

One would think it would be standard practice to provide these free drug samples to the patients who can least afford them. However, this is not what researchers discovered. Samples provided to patients often went to the persons who already had insurance coverage and who could best afford them. And this was when the samples actually reached the patient. Often the free samples were used by doctors themselves, by members of their family or their relatives. In many cases, the drugs never reached the doctor's office, according to the researchers. Many times they were used by the salespersons themselves or passed out to their friends.

When the samples were given to the poor, they were usually presented as a starter set along with a prescription to complete the recommended amount of the drug to be taken to handle the problem for which they were given. Often a person with little or no money would take the starter set but never fill the prescription for the remaining drugs.

Researchers also found that when the drugs were dispensed through a doctor rather than a pharmacy, very little information was provided to the patient regarding how the drug was to be taken. Information on possible interactions with other drugs was usually not provided either, and this could prove harmful to the patient. Finally, a doctor's office would not have the same ability as a pharmacy to get into contact with a patient if new information regarding harmful drug reactions or side effects became known.

Finally, researchers found that free promotional drug samples can greatly increase the cost of drugs that are ultimately sold to the public. A study they referenced showed that drug companies spent about \$16 billion in retail dollars during 2004 on drug samples. They also noted that these costs continue to rise, taking this figure steadily upward in the years to follow.

Of course, drug companies are unlikely to sample the time-tested products that doctors regularly prescribe. On the other hand, they usually promote the newest and least tested products in their arsenal; items they want the doctor to know about and begin prescribing. Sometimes these products have had little testing before hitting the sampling circuit. One example researchers pointed out was Vioxx®. Several years ago it became the most highly promoted and sampled product given to

doctors. Then, just several years later, it was pulled from the market and became the subject of massivelawsuits.

Source: The Public Library of Science. "No More Free Drug Samples?" May 2009.
<http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi?artid=2669216>