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FAQs



Ethical relationships between
health professionals and **industry**

1. Meeting with drug representatives

I have been asked to meet with drug representatives. How should I manage this?

Can meeting with drug representatives influence my own practices?

In short, yes. Whilst many doctors and health professionals generally feel that they would not be influenced by meeting with drug representatives or other interactions with industry, evidence shows that such contacts have the potential to impact their diagnosis or treatment in a manner not consistent with the patient's best interest. There is evidence that meeting with drug representatives can influence prescribing choices (both within and between classes of drugs), requests for medications to be placed on hospital formularies, and interpretations of evidence.

What are the risks and benefits of meeting with drug representatives?

The three key risks of meeting with drug representatives are that such interactions may:

- Inappropriately influence prescribing with negative impacts on quality of care
- Undermine the integrity and assumption of independence of health professionals from industry and therefore the trust on which clinical relationships depend
- Create relationships that, in turn, generate conflicts of interests

There are some potential benefits to meeting with drug representatives. It can be argued that such meetings provide an opportunity to learn about new treatments and products, and initiatives such as compassionate access programs.

Are there alternative ways in which I can get the benefits of meeting with drug representatives without the risks?

Yes, the best way to keep up-to-date with new treatments and products is to obtain this information from impartial sources such as articles from peer-reviewed medical journals, evidence-based guidelines and educational material from trusted impartial sources.

How can I minimise the risk of my practice being influenced?

The easiest way to minimise the risk of your practice being influenced by drug representatives is not to meet with them and to only obtain information about new products and treatments from impartial sources.

If you choose to meet with drug representatives, you need to be mindful that their role is to increase the sales of particular products. You therefore need to put in place systematic ways of recognising potential sources of influence and ensuring you are not inappropriately affected by them. This might include not accepting gifts or samples, actively seeking out alternative sources of information about the company's products, and being alert to the possibility of these meetings being used as a basis for establishing other types of interactions.

Should I accept off-prints of journal articles from drug representatives?

There is generally little need for hospital-based physicians to accept off-prints of journals from drug reps because these will generally be accessible through health department, hospital and university databases and journal archives. Off-prints might be more attractive to physicians in private practice who do not have access to such resources. If you do choose to accept an off-print, you need to recognise that it might not be methodologically sound and, even if it is, it would have been carefully selected to present a point of view. As such, you need to critically appraise both the source, methodological rigour and conclusions of off-prints. It is also recommended that should you decide to accept this material, you provide the drug representatives with feedback on any unsubstantiated or unbalanced information you receive.

Should I accept free samples?

Some argue that there can be benefit to patient care of accepting free samples such as being able to provide patients with treatments at no cost to them. However, you should keep in mind that the provision of samples is primarily a marketing exercise intended to create relationships of reciprocity between clinicians and industry representatives, to accustom clinicians to prescribe particular products and to establish cohorts of patients on long-term treatment with newer and often more expensive drugs.

It is important to remember that free samples tend to be for newer and often more expensive drugs which may offer little to no benefit over older and cheaper drugs for the same condition. Consider this before assuming the short-term cost saving is beneficial overall.

Should I receive patient support resources e.g. drug diaries, educational materials?

It is in everyone's interests to provide patients with resources that improve safety and adherence to treatment. However, if you accept these resources, you should make sure that they are being used to support treatments that are in the patient's best interests and that the use of the resource does not bind the patient to the company

In addition, as with free samples, these patient support resources tend to be for newer and often more expensive drugs which may offer little to no benefit over older and cheaper drugs for the same condition.

Should I accept a gift from a drug representative?

In general, you should not accept gifts from drug reps. Gifts create an expectation of reciprocity and may create perceived or actual conflicts of interest and introduce (often unconscious) biases that can influence your practice and prescribing behaviour. Importantly, this can occur irrespective of the size of the gift. Because industry codes now require gifts

to be made public in a centralised database, and you might need to declare them in other contexts (e.g. committee memberships), acceptance of gifts might impact on your perceived integrity and trustworthiness. You should also not ask for or accept any money in exchange for seeing industry representatives or recommending their products.

Should I allow the drug representative to take me out for a meal or provide hospitality?

Offers of hospitality such as meals are a type of gift. As with any other kind of gift, there is little justification for accepting personal invitations of hospitality. This is different to an organisation accepting support for meetings, which might include food or other types of hospitality, where there is no personal provision of hospitality and “firewalls” are in place to prevent bias.

Can I ask a drug representative about compassionate access programs?

It is reasonable to ask a drug representative about compassionate access programs. However, you should bear in mind that the medicines offered through compassionate access programs might not be supported by high levels of data on safety and efficacy (particularly if the medicine is not yet been registered by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA)¹ in Australia and from Medsafe² in Aotearoa New Zealand). Like drug samples, compassionate access schemes can also serve marketing purposes by familiarising clinicians and patients with particular medicines.

Can I ask a drug representative about off-label use of a drug?

Clinicians are generally expected to adhere to the principles of ‘rational prescribing’ and ‘quality use of medicines’, which emphasise prescription of medicines that have been demonstrated to be safe and effective. In this context, a distinction is often made between ‘on-label’ and ‘off-label’ prescribing. ‘On-label’ uses are those that have been approved by regulatory organisations such as the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) following formal assessment of safety and efficacy data from clinical trials, whereas ‘off-label’ prescribing refers to situations where medications are prescribed outside such approved indications (e.g. for a different indication, patient age range, dose or route).

In Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, industry promotion of off-label prescribing of its products is prohibited, however such practices are common and known to have significant effects on prescribing behaviour. It is best to source information about off-label use of a drug from reliable sources of information such as peer reviewed journals and clinical experts.

Can I get into legal or professional trouble for meeting with drug representatives?

It is not illegal to meet with drug representatives. However, there are clearly ethical and professional issues raised by interactions with the pharmaceutical industry. Your professional reputation might be negatively impacted if you are perceived to be unduly influenced by interactions with drug representatives or not sufficiently transparent about any interactions you have. There might be serious legal and professional consequences if decisions about patient care are deemed to be biased or clinically inappropriate.

Do I need to declare my meeting with a drug company representative?

There are currently no clear rules in place regarding declarations of meetings with drug representatives. However, it is good practice to alert patients and colleagues to the fact that you interact with the pharmaceutical industry (e.g. to professional bodies, employers, committees, students, on research articles and in relevant clinical situations).

1 <https://www.tga.gov.au/>

2 <https://www.medsafe.govt.nz/index.asp>

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