Physicians' and Their Patients' Attitudes Towards Gifts Given by the Pharmaceutical Companies

- Babita.R[*] - Dr. M. Jezer Jebanesan[**]

Abstract

There is always some soft tendency towards gift articles on the part of the receiver. The drug companies also gift some articles to the physicians and patients as well. The present study was undertaken to assess and compare the attitude of the physicians and their patients towards the pharmaceutical gifts in Kanniyakumari district. The positive impact and the hidden cost on the higher side are the important aspects brought to light by this study. The statistical applications proved the real impact of such gifts upon the so called beneficiaries.

Keywords: Attitude, Parmaceutical Gifts, Luxury, Ethical Implications, Practitioners

Introduction

Pharmaceutical companies spend a major portion of its revenue on promotional activities. Their primary promotional activity is to influence the physicians to prescribe. Pharmaceutical companies use a wide range of strategies to influence the physicians. Giving gifts to the physicians is one among them. Pharmaceutical companies give gifts to the physicians in return for their prescriptions. Gifts given by the pharmaceutical companies to the physicians are both very common as well as controversial. The gifts to the physicians range from pen, mugs, calendars, electronic goods to expensive foreign trips and luxury cars. Awareness of the ethical implications of such gifts has been raised for the past few decades and a code of ethics has been formulated for interaction between medical practitioners and pharmaceutical companies.

The present study was undertaken to assess and compare the attitude of the physicians and their patients towards the pharmaceutical gifts in Kanniyakumari district.

Objective of the Study

1. The objective of the study is to compare the attitude of the physicians and their patients towards gifts of select pharmaceutical companies in the study area

Hypothesis

There is no significant difference in the attitude among the physicians and their patients towards the appropriateness and influence of pharmaceutical companies' gifts.

Methodology

The study is based on primary data. Primary data were collected from the physicians and their patients in Kanniyakumari district. An interview schedule with structured questions was prepared for the purpose. Only those respondents who were willing to participate were interviewed.The sample size for the study is 100 comprising of 50 physicians and 50 patients. Simple random sampling was used to select the respondents.

In the present study, tools such as percentages, mean and 't' tests were applied in order to analyse the primary data and arrive at meaningful conclusions. The data collected were analysed using SPSS version 19.0 for windows throughout the study.

Results and Discussions

Ten gifts which are generally given by the pharmaceutical companies to the physicians are selected for analysis. In order to assess and compare the attitude of the physicians

[*]**Assistant Professor in Commerce, S.T. Hindu College, Nagercoil.**
[**]**Scott Christian College (Autonomous), Nagercoil.**

and their patients towards these gifts, they were asked to rate these gifts on a five point Likert Scale whether it is appropriate for the physicians to accept the gift and whether such acceptance would likely to influence the prescription of the physician.

Patients' Attitude

Gender, age and educational qualification of the patients are considered as the patient characteristics for the study. The results on these aspects are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Characteristics of the Patients

Sl. No.	Characteristics		No. of Respondents	Percentage
(1)	(2)		(3)	(4)
1.	Gender	Male	18	36
		Female	32	64
		Total	50	100
2.	Age	Below 20 years	4	8
		20-40 years	18	36
		40-60 years	20	40
		Above 60 years	8	16
		Total	50	100
3.	Qualification	No formal Education	8	16
		School Education	20	40
		Graduates	22	44
		Total	50	100

Source: Primary data.

Table1 indicates that 64 per cent of the patient respondents are female and 36 per cent of them are male. Forty per cent of the respondents are in the age group of 40 to 60 years and 44 per cent of the patient respondents are graduates.

The patients were asked to rate some specific and related questions which revealed their general attitude towards pharmaceutical gifts. The general attitude of the patients towards pharmaceutical gifts is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 General Attitude of the Patients

Sl. No.	Inquiry	Yes (%)	No (%)	Unsure (%)
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1.	Do you know that pharmaceutical companies give gifts to the physicians?	62	38	-
2.	Does your physician accept gifts?	25	20	55
3.	Do you feel that costs of these gifts are passed on to the patients?	42	32	26
4.	Do you think that acceptance of gifts obligates the physicians to prescribe products of that company?	37	30	33

Source: Primary data.

From Table 2, it is clear that 62 per cent of the patients are aware that the pharmaceutical companies give gifts to the physicians. Further enquiry on this aspect revealed that 23 per cent of the patients who were unaware, altered their perception towards the medical profession. Patients whose perception of the medical profession changed after knowing about the gifts found the gifts less appropriate ($p=0.07$) and more influential ($p=0.02$) than those whose perception had not changed.

Twenty five per cent of the patients said that their doctor accepted gifts and 55 per cent of the patient respondents were unsure about the acceptance of gifts by their physicians. Patients who felt their own doctor accepted gifts found it more appropriate than those patients who felt their doctor did not accept gifts ($p<0.005$).

Forty two percent of the patients felt the costs of these gifts are ultimately passed on to the patients and 37 per cent of the patient respondents thought that the acceptance of gifts obliges the physicians to prescribe products of that company.

Physicians Attitude

Gender, age, specialisation and experience are considered as characteristics of physician for the study. The results on these aspects are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Characteristics of the Physicians

Sl. No.	Characteristics		No. of Respondents	Percentage
(1)	(2)		(3)	(4)
1.	Gender	Male	29	58
		Female	21	42
		Total	**50**	**100**
2.	Age	Below 30 years	13	26
		30-50 years	32	64
		Above 50 years	5	10
		Total	**50**	**100**

3.	Specialization	Graduate (MBBS)	7	14
		Post Graduate (MD)	19	38
		Super Specialty	24	48
		Total	**50**	**100**
4.	Experience	Below 10 years	22	44
		10-20 years	25	50
		Above 20 years	3	6
		Total	**50**	**100**

Source: Primary data.

Table 3 indicates that 58 per cent of the physicians are male and 64 per cent of the physicians are in the age group of 30 to 50 years. Forty eight per cent of the physicians are super specialist and 50 per cent of the physicians had an experience of 10 to 20 years of medical practice after their graduation.

Physicians' general attitude towards pharmaceutical gifts is presented in Table 4.

Table 4 General Attitude of the Physicians

Sl. No.	Inquiry	Yes (%)	No (%)	Doubtful (%)
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1.	Are you aware of the guidelines (at least one) on accepting gifts from pharmaceutical companies?	64	36	-
2.	Do you accept gifts from pharmaceutical companies?	73	20	7
3.	Are you willing to have them generally known to all?	82	15	3
4.	Do you think that these gifts might influence your prescription?	11	89	-

Source: Primary data.

Comparison of Patients and Physicians' Attitude

In order to compare the attitude of the physicians and their patients towards pharmaceutical company gifts, ten gifts (that are generally and commonly given by pharmaceutical companies to the physicians) namely vacation trip, dinner, pocket knife, pen stand, pen, table lamp, mobile pouch/stand, table-top calendars, scribbling pads and torch are identified for further analysis. The physicians and their patients were asked to rate these gifts on five-point scale for being appropriate (highly appropriate, appropriate, moderate, nor appropriate, not at all appropriate) and being influential (highly influential, influential, moderate, not influential and not at all influential).

The mean scores of the attitude of the physicians and their patients towards appropriateness of the gifts are computed separately. The 't' test was used to find out the significant differences among the attitude of the physicians and their patients towards appropriateness of pharmaceutical gifts. The test was made with the null hypothesis that "There is no significant difference in the attitudeamong the physicians and their patients towards the appropriateness of pharmaceutical gifts".

The results of the mean scores and the respective 'p' values at five per cent level are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 Mean Scores for Appropriateness of the Gifts

Sl. No.	Gifts	Mean Scores		Overall	'p' Value
		Patients	Physicians		
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
1.	Vacation Trip	2.74	4.54	3.64	0.000*
2.	Dinner	2.86	3.70	3.28	0.000*
3.	Pocket Knife	2.98	2.46	2.72	0.000*
4.	Pen Stand	3.74	3.18	3.46	0.000*
5.	Pen	3.46	3.06	3.26	0.003*
6.	Table Lamp	4.06	3.60	3.83	0.000*
7.	Mobile Pouch / Stand	3.74	2.40	3.07	0.000*
8.	Table-top Calendar	4.20	2.88	3.54	0.000*
9.	Scribbling Pad	4.44	3.62	4.03	0.000*
10.	Torch	4.40	3.98	4.19	0.003*

Source: Primary data.*Significant at five per cent level

The gifts namely scribbling pad, torch and table lamp are considered appropriate by the patients, as their mean scores were 4.44, 4.40 and 4.06 respectively. On the other hand vacation trip is considered appropriate by the physicians since it has a mean score of 4.54.

Regarding the attitude of physicians and their patients towards the appropriateness of the gifts, significant difference was found in all the ten gifts ($p < 0.05$). Hence the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted that "There is significant difference in the attitude of

the physicians and their patients towards the appropriateness of pharmaceutical companies' gifts".

The mean scores on these gifts for their influence on prescription were computed separately. The't' test was used to find out the significant differences among the attitude of the physicians and their patients towards influence of pharmaceutical gifts. The test was made with the null hypothesis that "There is no significant difference in the attitude among the physicians and their patients towards the influence of pharmaceutical gifts".

The results of mean scores and the respective 'p' values at five per cent level are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 Mean Scores for Influence of the Gifts

Sl. No.	Gifts	Mean Scores		Over-all	'p' Value
		Patients	Physicians		
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
1.	Vacation Trip	4.12	4.16	4.14	0.755
2.	Dinner	3.76	3.24	3.50	0.000*
3.	Pocket Knife	2.92	2.88	2.90	0.817
4.	Pen Stand	2.70	2.58	2.64	0.525
5.	Pen	3.36	3.04	3.22	0.027
6.	Table Lamp	3.38	3.28	3.33	0.397
7.	Mobile Pouch / Stand	2.64	2.42	2.53	0.048
8.	Table-top Calendar	2.64	2.80	2.72	0.211
9.	Scribbling Pad	2.82	3.92	3.37	0.000*
10.	Torch	3.70	3.76	3.73	0.654

Source: Primary data.*Significant at five per cent level

The patients and physicians found that vacation trip as a gift that influences the prescription of the physician with respective mean scores of 4.12 and 4.16.

Regarding the attitude of physicians and their patients towards the influence of the gifts, significant difference was found in the case of dinner and scribbling pad ($p<0.005$). Hence the null hypothesis is rejected for these gifts and the alternative hypothesis is accepted that "There is significant difference in the attitude of the physicians and their patients towards the influence of pharmaceutical companies' gifts namely dinner and scribbling pad". Comparative analysis of the mean scores revealed that the patients found the gifts more appropriate than influencing except vacation trips and dinner. The physicians also found the gifts more appropriate than influencing but for pocket knife, mobile pouch/stand and scribbling pads.

Findings

The findings of the study based on the analysis of primary data are:

(i) Sixty per cent of the patients are aware that pharmaceutical companies give gifts to the physicians.

(ii) Twenty three per cent of those patients who were unaware altered their perception of the medical profession.

(iii) Twenty five per cent of the patients said that their physician accepted gifts, 20 percent said that they did not accept gifts and 53 per cent were unsure.

(iv) Forty two per cent of the patients felt that the cost of the gifts was ultimately passed on to the patients, 32 per cent did not feel so and 26 per cent of them were unsure.

(v) Thirty seven per cent of the patients felt that the gifts obliges the physicians to prescribe the products of that company.

(vi) Patients who felt their own doctor accepted gifts found it more appropriate than those patients who felt their doctor did not accept gifts ($p<0.005$).

(vii) Patients whose perception of the medical profession changed after knowing about the gifts found the gifts less appropriate ($p=0.07$) and more influential ($p=0.02$) than those whose perception had not changed.

(viii) Sixty four per cent of the physicians were aware of at least one guideline on accepting gifts from pharmaceutical companies.

(ix) Seventy three per cent of the physicians said that they would accept gifts from pharmaceutical companies.

(x) Of those physicians who would accept gifts from pharmaceutical companies, 82 per cent were willing to have them "generally known" to all.

(xi) Less than 15 per cent of the physicians felt the gifts might influence prescribing except in the case of vacation trip.

Conclusion

The patients are more likely than their physicians to believe that accepting gifts from pharmaceutical will influence the prescriptions. But, in the study area the patients' attitude towards these gifts was found to be more appropriate than influential except for vacation trips and dinner. It is thus deduced that gifts of smaller value are considered appropriate but expensive gifts are considered influential by the patients. The physicians also believed that the gifts are more appropriate than influential and were willing to make the gifts "generally known" to all.

The recent guidelines of medical ethics prohibit the physicians from accepting gifts from the pharmaceutical companies. Under existing regulations, pharmaceutical companies cannot, directly or indirectly, sponsor travel, entertainment, hospitality for medical practitioners and their families. Despite these guidelines, pharmaceutical companies in order survive in the market place, continue to give gifts. The physicians accept these gifts considering it as an incentive .for generating sales for the companies' products and that there is nothing wrong in doing so. Physicians will make gifts of small value "generally known" to all, but will not disclose gifts of higher value given by the pharmaceutical companies. The cost of such gifts will eventually be passed on by the pharmaceutical companies to the patients. Such a practice, both on the part of the pharmaceutical companies and the physicians, doesn't come in the limelight and will definitely do harm to the society when they exceed a certain limit.

Reference

Lexchin J.Interactions between physicians and the pharmaceutical industry: what does the literature say?Can Med Assoc J.1993149*:*14017

Madhavan, M. M. et al., (1997), "The gift relationship between pharmaceutical companies and doctors: an exploratory survey of doctors", Journal of Clinical Pharmacy and Therapeutics, Vol. 22 (3), pp. 207-218.

Randell, T (1991), "Ethics of receiving gift considered", Journal of American Medical Association, Vol. 265, pp. 442-443.

Wazana A. Physicians and the pharmaceutical industry: is a gift ever just a gift? JAMA2000;283:373-80

Department of Pharmaceuticals.Code of Marketing Practice for Indian Pharmaceutical Industry.http://pharmaceuticals.gov.in/uniformcode.pdf.

Puri N. Should Doctors be banned from accepting gifts from pharma companies? Express Health. 2007

Times news network MCI prohibits doctors from taking gifts. The Times of India.2010 January 5.

Nagrajan R. Doctors to be penalized for pharma freebies. The Times of India. 2010 March 14.

Howard SM. Gifts to physicians from the pharmaceutical industry.JAMA.2000; 283:2655–6.