

Medical students protest perks from drug companies

Jake Donaldson, a third-year medical student at the University of Washington, has lately been offered a few free things: a couple of textbooks left in his mailbox, pens and lunches at the medical center—all courtesy of a pharmaceutical company.

Drug companies in 2002 adopted new guidelines to cut back on expensive meals and other lavish perks for doctors. They instead began pitching their products over modest lunches in doctors' offices and hospitals, including those where medical students learn. Whether accepting small gifts can influence behavior is a much debated matter that has thus far focused primarily on doctors.

But Donaldson and his fellow students say the gifts are a threat to students' integrity.

In May, they drew up a petition—which more than half of the first- and second-year students have since signed—calling on the university to ban representatives of pharmaceutical companies from campus, prohibit students from accepting gifts and require full financial disclosure from guest speakers.

"The students really want to be sure their education isn't biased by pharmaceutical companies," says Thomas Norris, vice dean for academic affairs. Norris says the administration is working with students to develop a policy that should be finalized later this year.

In 2005, only 10 of the 126 medical schools in the US had such policies in place, but the number is rising. In February, Yale University



No free lunch: Drug makers' gifts can bias students, warns University of Vermont medical student Justin Sanders.

School of Medicine banned all gifts and on-campus meals from drug companies, followed in July by the University of Pennsylvania. The University of Vermont and the University of New Mexico are crafting guidelines.

"A good medical school shouldn't expose students to doctors receiving gifts for four years," says Robert Alpern, dean of Yale's medical school. Otherwise, he says, "they come to accept it as the norm."

At least one drug company, Pfizer, says promotions are aimed at doctors, not students. "When content is delivered in a medical institution such as a teaching hospital, students are exposed," says spokesperson Alison Lehanski.

Still, students, like doctors, are susceptible to the industry's multibillion dollar marketing machine, says Frederick Sierles, a psychiatry professor at Rosalind Franklin University in Chicago. In a study of 826 third-year students at eight medical schools, Sierles found that students interact with drug companies about once a week, and tend to view gifts and activities sponsored by drug companies as valuable (*JAMA* 294, 1034–1042; 2005).

The American Medical Student Association's voluntary guidelines recommend that doctors, residents and students not accept promotional gifts. The association in 2002 launched the PharmFree campaign to educate students about the influence of drug companies.

"Medical students can quickly feel entitled to the perks pharmaceutical companies shower doctors and students with, and think they won't be biased," says Justin Sanders, chair of PharmFree and a student at the University of Vermont.

Students might be more skeptical of drug companies if medical schools address the issue formally, says Sierles. But a greater challenge, he says, will be to convince the students' mentors to stop accepting gifts.

"As long as physicians accept gifts and deny it's affecting them and students see this in their role models," he says, "we aren't going to see a radical shift."

Alisa Opar, New York

WHO's next?

The World Health Organization (WHO) is seeking a new leader, and 13 of the agency's 192 member states have nominated candidates. The incumbent director general, South Korea's Jong-Wook Lee, died suddenly on 22 May, just three years into his five-year term. The WHO's 34-nation executive board will whittle down the list and present a name to the World Health Assembly on 9 November. The race is more crowded than expected, and two permanent members of the UN Security Council, China and France, have ignored convention by nominating candidates. The secret voting and political nature of the selection process make predicting the frontrunner difficult—Lee himself was a surprise winner in 2003—but here are some of the leading contenders.



MARGARET CHAN, CHINA

WHO: The WHO's assistant director-general of communicable diseases since 2005.

Bio: Served for nine years as director of health in Hong Kong, where she tackled bird flu and SARS. Has

led the WHO's communicable diseases surveillance and response program for a year.

Odds: China's first nominee for the job, Chan's experience with SARS and bird flu make her a formidable candidate. The position generally rotates among continents, and Chan could get an additional boost if Asian countries push for a candidate because Lee's term was cut short.

JULIO FRENK, MEXICO

WHO: Mexico's minister of health since 2000.

Bio: Is credited with implementing reforms to bring health coverage to Mexico's uninsured millions. As a

senior WHO official from 1998 to 2000, analyzed health situations and trends.

Odds: Frenk made the first cut in the 2003 race but lost to Lee, and is making a big push for the position this time around. He could edge out Omi and Chan with his depth of experience, or if voters follow the unwritten rule of rotating the top post among continents: of the last four director-generals, two have been Asian and two European.

