

Recently Pfizer, the worlds largest pharmaceutical company, was fined a record 2.3 billion dollars. The charges related to the company's continued attempts to promote drugs for off label purposes.

In order for a drug to be approved for use by the FDA, the drug company must show that it is effective and relatively safe (it has fallen short in this area on many occasions). Typically, research is done to show effectiveness for only one condition. Once the drug is approved and out on the market however, doctors are free to use it to for any condition they wish. This bypasses the whole purpose for FDA oversight, but it is perfectly legal.

What isn't legal is for the drug companies to promote the drug for non-approved uses. Drug companies have been marketing drugs for off label use for years, but the government is becoming more vigilant in monitoring this practice. Pfizer has been particularly active in this area and has been fined by the government four times now.

Drug companies would often encourage doctors to prescribe their drugs by footing the bill for lavish vacations or being taken to expensive restaurants or golf outings. The question that I have which I haven't seen addressed is if the drug companies continue to do this even under the threat of government fines, it must work. It must result in significant increases in sales. Therefore, enough doctors are being swayed to prescribe drugs for which there is little or no scientific basis for their use, just so they can receive these bribes.

Doctors should perform their due diligence when making decisions about the use of a new drug. They should not simply accept the promotional efforts of the manufacturers. They should read the research for themselves or use the opinions of independent experts that don't have ties to the drug companies.

It is our duty to care for our patients by using the most effective treatments with the least risk of harm. Since all drugs have the risk of side effects, using them for conditions without the proper scientific support, is subjecting the patient to an unnecessary risk.