

There is no question that our health care system is linked closely to the pharmaceutical industry. The majority of treatments provided to patients in the United States involve some type of drug, often more than one. Medications are not the only approach to helping individuals recover from illness. In fact, there are frequently much safer and in the long run, more effective methods. Still, so many of us expect and even demand medications for our health problems.

To understand this phenomenon, we must simply look at what made Coke the number one soft drink and McDonalds the number one fast food restaurant...advertising! The drug industry is one of the worlds major purchasers of advertising. In the U.S. alone, they are spending over \$30 billion per year. In 1996 they spent \$11.4 billion, nearly a 3 fold increase in just over 10 years.

\$25 billion of the \$30 billion was spent to influence doctors and hospitals. 94% of physicians report that they have some type of relationship with the pharmaceutical industry. 83% receive food from drug reps at the office. 35% are reimbursed for attending meetings that frequently promote their products. 28% are paid for consulting, lecturing on behalf of the drug company and/or enrolling patients in drug trials.

Family practitioners on average meet with drug company representatives 16 times per month. This is up from 4.4 times per month in 2000.

A former drug rep for Eli Lilly recently described his job activities to a congressional subcommittee. He said his job involved “rewarding physicians with gifts and attention for their allegiance to your product and company despite what may be ethically appropriate.” His training involved how to use free samples to increase sales, how to develop friendships with doctors and to offer gifts to encourage brand loyalty.

It is not just the doctor, however, that is influenced by the drug industry. The consumer is as well. Part of the \$30 billion in drug promotions is spent on influencing you, and it works! Since congress began allowing drug companies to advertise to the public, more and more patients enter their doctors’ offices with requests for drugs that they have seen in an advertisement.

Unfortunately rather than taking the time to teach these patients why the advertised drug may not be best for them, many physicians succumb to the patient’s wishes. For example, even though current guidelines recommend that doctors NOT give antibiotics right away for ear infections, 85% still do and their reason is that the parents expect it even when research shows that these antibiotics raise the risk for asthma later in life.

The take-away message here is: don’t succumb to slick drug advertising, do your own research on the internet before taking medications, and discuss your concerns with your doctor.

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