

Relationship of physicians with the pharmaceutical industry in Pakistan: present status, issues, and way forward

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Abstract

This manuscript examines the ethics of the relationship between the pharmaceutical industry and practising physicians. The pharmaceutical industry is alleged to provide incentives to physicians and who in return are expected to prescribe their manufactured medications. Such practices are often considered unethical and against the rules and regulations of the regulatory bodies. The core issue facing physicians and pharmaceutical industry relationships is lack of regulation and accountability. Public education and awareness are lacking, and they are unable to question prescription practices of practicing physicians. Patient advocacy groups do not exist to safeguard the patient's rights. There is a need to strengthen regulatory control to ensure the physician community and pharmaceutical industry relationship remains ethical. Both the physician community and pharmaceutical industry are important stakeholders in healthcare delivery and the ethical relationship between them will benefit health care services. Further discussion and debate on this important yet extremely sensitive issue is strongly recommended.

Keywords: Physicians; Pharmaceutical industry; Ethics; Regulatory body; Monitoring

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Present Status

Healthcare delivery is a complex process involving multiple stakeholders, from crucial role of academia and policy makers, to important part played by physicians, pharmaceutical industry and regulatory authorities.

Physician/pharmaceutical industry engagement

While physician community provides healthcare services at the forefront, they must work with and depend on support from important stakeholders including the pharmaceutical industry. The relationship between physicians and pharmaceutical industry is complex and

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includes engagement with regards to drug development, drug prescription and surveillance. These engagements introduce ethical dimensions into an already complex physician community and pharmaceutical industry relationship, where patient and societal interests should dominate rather than personal gains.¹ Physician advocacy for patient interest is of paramount importance.

Private sector role

Pharmaceutical industry and its role in addressing health care needs of communities, including relationship with physicians is under discussion, particularly with regards to private sector increasing role in healthcare sector.² Private sector offers services and products, mostly at a profit, raising healthcare costs. There exist serious concerns regarding scope and regulation of physicians and pharmaceutical industry engagement and relationship, particularly with regards to health as a human right.³

Conflict of interest

Conflict of interest, due to profit generation targets of pharmaceutical companies and the related rising healthcare costs for the public has been identified as a continuing challenge.⁴ It results not only in excess costs to patients, but also undue adverse effects, and drug resistance development.⁵⁻⁷

Incentives offered by the pharmaceutical industry

Benefits offered to physicians by the pharmaceutical industry are often unethical and against the rules and regulations of regulatory authorities. Doctors are officially allowed some material gifts or promotional material such as pens and calendars. But it is common knowledge that physician clinics are renovated by the pharmaceutical industry. Allegations about expensive gifts including cars being offered to physicians against ethical rules are also heard of⁸

Rumours are that physicians are offered free travel and pleasure trips under the pretext of continuing medical education programs.⁸ Opportunities outside of the professional setting to socialize or to participate in activities that primarily constitute leisure or entertainment are allegedly offered by the pharmaceutical industry to physicians.⁸ There are

rumours that physician's family travel is sponsored travel and wedding reception of children are hosted by the pharmaceutical industry against ethical rules and regulations.⁸

Issues

Issues confronting physicians and pharmaceutical industry relationship are multiple and of a serious ethical nature.

Governance

Core issue facing physicians and pharmaceutical industry relationship is lack of regulation and accountability. Rules and regulations exist to counter unethical practices by the physician community and pharmaceutical industry. The challenge is lack of enforcement of rules and regulation by concerned authorities, not just for physicians and pharmaceutical industry but also with regards to medicine quality.⁹

Accountability of physician and pharmaceutical industry relationship is lacking and there exists a lack of implementation. Health care commissions (HCC) are available to put up serious complaints. It is stated on HCC websites, but does HCC receive complaints, it is not known to many. Ethical issues concerning physicians and pharmaceutical industry relationship have been widely reported, and measures to address them are reported to be lacking.¹⁰

Unfortunately, it is alleged that physicians are not held accountable for their omissions due to strong position they enjoy in society.¹¹

Public awareness

Patient education helps them make better choices and empowers them. Unfortunately, patient education and awareness are lacking, and they are unable to question physician's prescriptions and practices.¹² Patient advocacy groups do not exist to safeguard patients' rights.¹³ Isolated attempts to safeguard patient rights do not yield desired accountability. Social media is a tool that can serve as a platform to educate patients, so they can question physician's prescription.¹⁴

Brand marketing

Use of generic medicines is beneficial for patients.¹⁵ Unfortunately, this mode of prescribing is not practiced in Pakistan. Molecules are manufactured and marketed by dozens of pharmaceutical companies by different trade names. This practice is allowed unchecked by regulators. It allows the private pharmaceutical sector to increasingly provide a wider range of products for the same generic, and at a profit¹⁶ The general public is unaware about the difference between various products. Pharmaceutical

companies can persuade physicians to prescribe their product, for which they oblige them with various incentives.

Irrational prescribing and use

Due to lack of regulations and monitoring mechanisms, unnecessary medications are prescribed by physicians or acquired over the counter, resulting in increased costs, side effects and resistance to antimicrobial drugs. The private sector is increasingly providing a wider range of products at an increased profit. Patients with limited resources are unable to pay for the medications they need, due to rising costs.

Patient representation on regulatory boards

Medications are approved by the Drug Regulatory Authority without input from public stakeholders. Patient or community representation for approval of medication and setting medication costs is alleged to be often lacking.

Way forward

An overwhelming need has been identified to ensure ethical and mutually supportive relationship between physicians and the pharmaceutical industry. The way forward to regularize engagement between physicians and pharmaceutical industry requires a multi-pronged approach: a package comprised of physician education, governance reforms, and participatory approach to medication-related legislation and pricing are proposed.

Physicians' education and awareness

Education of physicians on prescribing ethics can help counter-balance unethical promotion of medicines by pharmaceutical industry. An aware and honest physician cannot be persuaded to prescribe medicines, that offer low benefit to risk ratio, and are not in line with current evidence.¹⁷

Regulatory enforcement

A robust regulatory and accountability system is mandatory to regularize engagement between physician community and pharmaceutical industry. Rules and regulations already exist but need strengthening and enforcement.

All stakeholders should be engaged to enforce regulation and accountability system so that engagement between physicians and pharmaceutical industry is properly governed. Public education, engagement, and empowerment in such a process is mandatory, as they represent the main stakeholder and beneficiary. Public empowerment has been shown to improve health related outcomes.¹⁸

The regulatory bodies should be made strong and autonomous. Rules and regulation need to be updated and made strong enough to address the ethical issues facing physicians and pharmaceutical industry. Competent administrators should be engaged to effectively monitor compliance with laws but should be made autonomous and accountable. Openness and transparency will be required to ensure that ethical issues are properly addressed and monitored.

Advocacy groups

Public advocacy groups to safeguard patient rights should be established and made operational. They can educate the public about medication use and take up patient complaints for their resolution. Legal representation in such groups would be helpful to provide legal understanding and support. Advocacy helps in changing policies and is crucial in protecting patient rights.

Use of social media

Appropriate use of social media can be made to educate public about rationale use of medicines, and patient rights and advocacy issues can be addressed.

Physician societies' role

Physician societies and academic forums can help promote ethical relations between physicians and pharmaceutical industry and help control medication costs.¹⁹

Continuing medical education support

Engagement, including academic support for physician community by pharmaceutical industry, should continue and conducted in an ethical manner.²⁰

Involvement of all stakeholders

Discussion and debate with regards to physician and pharmaceutical industry ethical relationship should be encouraged at different forums, involving all stakeholders as physicians, pharmaceutical industry, public, regulatory authorities, academia, and policy makers.

Conclusion

Serious concerns exist with regards to physician community and pharmaceutical industry relationship. There is a need to strengthen regulatory control to ensure physician community and pharmaceutical industry engagement and interaction. Both the physician community and pharmaceutical industry are important stakeholders in healthcare delivery and ethical relationship between them will improve healthcare by promoting cost effective and rationale drug use. Further discussion and debate on this important yet extremely sensitive issue is strongly recommended.

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