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Pharmaceutical Industry–Sponsored Meals and Physician Prescribing Patterns for Medicare Beneficiaries

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IMPORTANCE The association between industry payments to physicians and prescribing rates of the brand-name medications that are being promoted is controversial. In the United States, industry payment data and Medicare prescribing records recently became publicly available.

OBJECTIVE To study the association between physicians' receipt of industry-sponsored meals, which account for roughly 80% of the total number of industry payments, and rates of prescribing the promoted drug to Medicare beneficiaries.

DESIGN, SETTING, AND PARTICIPANTS Cross-sectional analysis of industry payment data from the federal Open Payments Program for August 1 through December 31, 2013, and prescribing data for individual physicians from Medicare Part D, for all of 2013. Participants were physicians who wrote Medicare prescriptions in any of 4 drug classes: statins, cardioselective β -blockers, angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors and angiotensin-receptor blockers (ACE inhibitors and ARBs), and selective serotonin and serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs and SNRIs). We identified physicians who received industry-sponsored meals promoting the most-prescribed brand-name drug in each class (rosuvastatin, nebivolol, olmesartan, and desvenlafaxine, respectively). Data analysis was performed from August 20, 2015, to December 15, 2015.

EXPOSURES Receipt of an industry-sponsored meal promoting the drug of interest.

MAIN OUTCOMES AND MEASURES Prescribing rates of promoted drugs compared with alternatives in the same class, after adjustment for physician prescribing volume, demographic characteristics, specialty, and practice setting.

RESULTS A total of 279 669 physicians received 63 524 payments associated with the 4 target drugs. Ninety-five percent of payments were meals, with a mean value of less than \$20. Rosuvastatin represented 8.8% (SD, 9.9%) of statin prescriptions; nebivolol represented 3.3% (7.4%) of cardioselective β -blocker prescriptions; olmesartan represented 1.6% (3.9%) of ACE inhibitor and ARB prescriptions; and desvenlafaxine represented 0.6% (2.6%) of SSRI and SNRI prescriptions. Physicians who received a single meal promoting the drug of interest had higher rates of prescribing rosuvastatin over other statins (odds ratio [OR], 1.18; 95% CI, 1.17-1.18), nebivolol over other β -blockers (OR, 1.70; 95% CI, 1.69-1.72), olmesartan over other ACE inhibitors and ARBs (OR, 1.52; 95% CI, 1.51-1.53), and desvenlafaxine over other SSRIs and SNRIs (OR, 2.18; 95% CI, 2.13-2.23). Receipt of additional meals and receipt of meals costing more than \$20 were associated with higher relative prescribing rates.

CONCLUSIONS AND RELEVANCE Receipt of industry-sponsored meals was associated with an increased rate of prescribing the brand-name medication that was being promoted. The findings represent an association, not a cause-and-effect relationship.

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Physician-industry relationships—including sponsored meals and promotional speaking fees—are at the center of an international debate, intensified by recent transparency efforts in the United States and the European Union.¹⁻⁵ In the United States, in the last 5 months of 2013, 4.3 million industry payments totaling \$3.4 billion were made to more than 470 000 physicians and 1000 teaching hospitals.¹ Although some argue that industry-sponsored meals and payments facilitate the discussion of novel treatments,^{6,7} others have raised concerns about their potential to influence prescribing behavior.^{8,9}

Studies suggest that physician-industry relationships are associated with increased prescribing of brand-name drugs. Although most studies have relied on physician surveys¹⁰⁻¹³ or regional data,^{14,15} recent analyses of physician-specific payment records found a positive association between physicians' receipt of industry payments and the total percentage of their Medicare Part D prescriptions that are written for brand-name drugs.^{4,16,17} These analyses, however, did not identify the specific drug being promoted by each payment or assess the link between promotion and prescribing of individual drugs. In one study, the association between payments and prescribing was only significant among physicians who received at least \$2000 from industry.¹⁶ It is not known whether much smaller payments, such as sponsored meals, are associated with increased prescribing of the promoted brand-name drug over therapeutic alternatives.

We linked physician data sets from the Open Payments program and Medicare Part D to examine the association between industry payments and prescribing rates of the brand-name medications that were being promoted. We focused on meals sponsored by the pharmaceutical industry, which constitute nearly 80% of the total number of payments by drug and device manufacturers to physicians.¹

Methods

Study Population

This study was approved by the institutional review board at the University of California, San Francisco. We identified physicians who appeared in both Physician Compare¹⁸ and the 2013 Medicare Part D Prescriber file,¹⁹ which reports an end-of-year count of each physician's filled prescriptions. We excluded physicians whose total number of brand-name prescriptions was redacted because of low claim count. From this population, we created 4 study groups, each containing physicians who wrote more than 20 filled prescriptions in 1 of 4 drug categories: 3-hydroxy-3-methylglutaryl coenzyme A reductase inhibitors (statins), cardioselective β -blockers without sympathomimetic activity, angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors and angiotensin receptor blockers (ACE inhibitors and ARBs), and selective serotonin and serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs and SNRIs). These classes are first-line treatments for common conditions and have been included in previous studies of prescribing of brand-name drugs.^{20,21} Individual physicians could be included in more than 1 study group (eTable 1 and eFigure in the Supplement).

Key Points

Question Is the receipt of pharmaceutical industry-sponsored meals by physicians associated with their prescribing the promoted brand-name drug at higher rates to Medicare beneficiaries?

Findings In this cross-sectional study of 279 669 physicians, physicians who received a single meal promoting the drug of interest, with a mean value of less than \$20, had significantly higher rates of prescribing rosuvastatin as compared with other statins; nebivolol as compared with other β -blockers; olmesartan as compared with other angiotensin-converting-enzyme inhibitors and angiotensin-receptor blockers; and desvenlafaxine as compared with other selective serotonin and serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors.

Meaning Receipt of industry-sponsored meals was associated with an increased rate of prescribing the promoted brand-name medication to Medicare patients.

Drugs prescribed 10 or fewer times in a calendar year are not reported in that physician's Medicare prescribing record; to ensure that this redaction—which may affect our analysis of low-volume prescribers—did not significantly affect our results, we conducted a sensitivity analysis in which we increased our study group inclusion threshold from 20 to 200 prescriptions in the class.

Selection of Target Drugs

We identified the most-prescribed brand-name drug in each of the 4 drug categories in Medicare Part D in 2013. We required that each drug be patent protected through December 2014 and therefore not subject to pharmacy-level automatic substitution laws²² or declining promotion by the manufacturer in the last year of patent protection.²³ The resulting target drugs were rosuvastatin calcium (Crestor; AstraZeneca) among statins, nebivolol (Bystolic; Forest Laboratories) among cardioselective β -blockers, olmesartan medoxomil (Benicar; Daiichi Sankyo) among ACE inhibitors and ARBs, and desvenlafaxine succinate (Pristiq; Pfizer) among SSRIs and SNRIs.

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved all 4 target drugs 5 to 11 years before the study period, and all have generic alternatives in their class.²⁴ There is limited, mixed, or contrary evidence about the superiority of these 4 drugs over generic alternatives,²⁵⁻²⁸ and all 4 are excluded from the national formulary for the US Department of Veterans Affairs medical system.²⁹

Measures of Industry Payments

The 2013 Open Payments database describes the value and the drug or device being promoted for all payments to physicians from August through December 2013, as reported by pharmaceutical companies. Of the records, 95% identify a specific drug or device. Group payments, such as sponsored meals, are divided in value among the physicians present; when it is impossible to identify recipients (such as when refreshments are offered to all attendees of an annual conference), the payment is exempt from reporting. Because the first release of Open Payments data included records that were disputed during the phy-

sician review process, we examined data from the second release and excluded any remaining disputed payments.

We identified all target payments—defined as those promoting 1 of the 4 target drugs—made to physicians in the study groups. We included payments promoting multiple products. We used physician name and location to link each physician's payments with his or her prescription records, and excluded physicians with identical matching criteria to avoid inadvertently matching 1 physician's prescribing records with another physician's payment records.

The exposure of interest was industry-sponsored meals. Because meals were often reported as multiple small food payments on the same day, our primary measure of industry contact was number of days receiving a meal related to the promotion of a target drug during the 5-month study period. We limited our regression analysis to the 91% to 99% of physicians in each group whose only payments related to target drugs were for meals, excluding those who received other types of payment, such as research grants, consulting, and royalties.

Measures of Prescribing

For each physician, relative rates of prescribing a target drug were calculated as a percentage of that physician's total Medicare Part D prescriptions in the drug category in 2013. Our primary analysis did not standardize prescriptions by quantity of medications supplied; we conducted a sensitivity analysis in which we standardized claims to 30-day supplies.

Covariates

We adjusted for each physician's specialty; sex; region; practice size; number of years since medical school graduation; rural or urban practice setting³⁰; median household income in zip code according to 2000 US Census data³¹; prescribing volume within the drug class of interest in Medicare Part D; overall rate of brand-name drug prescribing across all drug classes in Medicare Part D; and percentage of prescriptions written for low-income subsidy beneficiaries, who have limited cost sharing for brand-name drugs, and Medicare Advantage beneficiaries, who obtain prescriptions through a managed care model with associated formulary differences.

Statistical Analysis

First, using χ^2 tests for categorical variables and 2-sample *t* tests for continuous variables, we tested the association between the aforementioned covariates and receipt of industry payments. We then compared mean rates of target-drug prescribing among physicians who received meals related to target drugs on 0 to 4 or more days during the study period. We used Cochran-Armitage trend tests to assess trends in prescribing behavior between groups.

Next, using multivariable grouped logistic regression models with binomial physician-level prescribing data, and adjusting for the aforementioned covariates, we measured the association between the number of days that a physician received meals related to target drugs and his or her prescribing rate of the promoted drug as a proportion of prescriptions in the class.

To examine the relationship between cost per meal and prescribing patterns, we first restricted our regression analy-

sis to physicians who received at least 1 meal and adjusted for the mean cost per meal received by each prescriber (<\$20 or ≥\$20). Next, in effect modifier analyses, we assessed whether the association between number of days receiving a meal and prescribing of a target drug was affected by mean cost per meal.

We conducted a sensitivity analysis using propensity score matching. We created a dichotomous outcome variable indicating whether a physician received any target meals; calculated individual propensity scores using grouped logistic regression models, with the baseline characteristics in Table 1 included as predictor variables; and reran our main regression analysis while controlling for the decile of propensity score.

To isolate the association between prescribing and promotion of a specific drug, rather than general exposure to industry promotion, we conducted a falsification test. Using the aforementioned regression methods, we assessed whether receipt of meals targeting rosuvastatin predicted desvenlafaxine prescribing among physicians who received no desvenlafaxine payments, and vice versa.

We performed a sensitivity analysis on rosuvastatin, which is 1 of the 2 high-intensity statins (rosuvastatin and atorvastatin calcium) that are available in the United States and recommended in clinical guidelines for patients with clinical atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease or severe hyperlipidemia.³² To reduce the potential impact of case mix on our results, we recalculated relative prescribing rates of rosuvastatin as a percentage of filled claims for only rosuvastatin or atorvastatin, and reran the multivariable regression analysis.

All *P* values were 2-tailed, and *P* ≤ .05 was considered significant. Analyses were conducted using R, version 3.1.2 (R Foundation for Statistical Computing), and SAS software, version 9.4 (SAS Institute).

Results

The study population included 279 669 physicians (eFigure in the Supplement). Of these, 155 849 physicians wrote more than 20 prescriptions in 1 of the 4 target drug classes and were assigned to study groups. Characteristics of the 4 study groups are presented in Table 1. A total of 129 675 (83%) of the sample physicians were assigned to multiple study groups, and 88 724 (57%) were included in all 4 groups.

Across the 4 study groups, 2% to 12% of physicians received payments promoting the target drug (Table 2). Of 63 524 payments (total value of \$1.4 million) related to target drugs, 95% were for sponsored meals, with a mean value of \$12 to \$18 per meal. The remaining 5% of payments promoting the target drugs included speaking fees, honoraria, travel expenses, and education (such as providing free textbooks or journal articles); physicians receiving these nonmeal payments were excluded from the regression analysis. Rosuvastatin represented 8.8% (SD, 9.9%) of statin prescriptions; nebivolol represented 3.3% (7.4%) of cardioselective β -blocker prescriptions; olmesartan represented 1.6% (3.9%) of ACE inhibitor and ARB prescriptions; and desvenlafaxine represented 0.6% (2.6%) of SSRI and SNRI prescriptions. Physicians who received meals related to target drugs had a

Table 1. Characteristics of Sample Physicians According to Study Group^a

Characteristic	Statin Prescribers (n = 131 207)	β-Blocker Prescribers (n = 126 134)	ACE Inhibitor and ARB Prescribers (n = 131 343)	SSRI and SNRI Prescribers (n = 123 318)
Demographic				
Male sex, %	91 699 (70)	89 541 (71)	91 883 (70)	85 182 (69)
Specialty, %				
Internal medicine	47 844 (36)	46 780 (37)	48 046 (37)	42 107 (34)
Family medicine and general practice	56 460 (43)	54 346 (43)	56 503 (43)	51 173 (42)
Cardiology	12 152 (9)	13 070 (10)	12 495 (10)	NA
Psychiatry	NA	NA	NA	12 680 (10)
Other	14 751 (11)	11 938 (9)	14 299 (11)	17 358 (14)
Group practice size, %				
1	29 345 (22)	28 178 (22)	29 170 (22)	30 062 (24)
2-10	26 466 (20)	25 501 (20)	26 555 (20)	25 820 (21)
11-50	20 304 (15)	19 643 (16)	20 486 (16)	19 454 (16)
≥51	55 092 (42)	52 812 (42)	55 132 (42)	47 982 (39)
Years since medical school graduation, %				
0-5	4484 (3)	3678 (3)	4610 (4)	3290 (3)
6-20	49 449 (38)	47 443 (38)	49 785 (38)	44 952 (36)
≥21	77 274 (59)	75 013 (59)	76 948 (59)	75 076 (61)
US geographic region, %				
Northeast	27 355 (21)	26 212 (21)	27 086 (21)	25 255 (20)
Midwest	31 192 (24)	30 345 (24)	31 350 (24)	29 770 (24)
South	44 543 (34)	42 891 (34)	44 686 (34)	42 573 (35)
Pacific West	18 749 (14)	17 884 (14)	18 732 (14)	17 291 (14)
Mountain West	7162 (5)	6744 (5)	7283 (6)	6760 (5)
Urban location, %	106 783 (81)	102 157 (81)	106 810 (81)	99 499 (81)
Median household income in zip code, mean (SD), \$1000	44.1 (17.6)	44.0 (17.4)	44.0 (17.6)	44.4 (17.5)
% claims for low-income subsidy beneficiaries, mean (SD)	42.3 (26.0)	41.9 (25.8)	42.5 (26.0)	44.9 (26.3)
% claims for Medicare Advantage Part D beneficiaries, mean (SD)	33.2 (24.8)	33.4 (24.9)	33.2 (24.8)	32.1 (24.5)
Prescribing				
Proportion of all 2013 claims (in any drug class) written for branded drugs, mean (SD)	23.0	22.4	22.9	21.8
Total claims within the drug class of interest (per MD), mean (SD)	514 (461)	303 (277)	407 (370)	272 (314)

Abbreviations: ACE, angiotensin-converting enzyme; ARB, angiotensin receptor blocker; NA, not applicable; SNRI, serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor; SSRI, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor.

^a Study groups include physicians from the study population who prescribed more than 20 filled claims within the drug category in 2013. Percentages do not add up to 100% owing to missing observations.

greater mean prescribing volume than those who did not (742.2 vs 470.1 statin prescriptions, 410.0 vs 299.8 β-blocker prescriptions, 562.7 vs 394.8 ACE inhibitor and ARB prescriptions, and 437.6 vs 269.5 SSRI and SNRI prescriptions; all comparisons, $P < .001$).

Characteristics of the larger study population, divided between physicians who did and did not receive industry payments of any kind (not limited to the 4 target drugs), are shown in eTable 2 in the Supplement. Compared with physicians receiving no payments, higher proportions of those receiving payments were men (110 143 [76%] vs 90 651 [67%]), solo practitioners (32 028 [22%] vs 24 233 [18%]), and practiced in the South (56 828 [40%] vs 38 335 [29%]). Physicians receiving payments wrote fewer claims for low-income subsidy beneficiaries (40% vs 43%) and Medicare Advantage beneficiaries (30% vs 33%). All characteristics were significantly associated with receipt of payment (all comparisons, $P < .001$).

Unadjusted Analyses

Figure 1 shows relative rates of target-drug prescribing as a function of days receiving meals related to target drugs. Physicians receiving meals related to target drugs on 4 or more days prescribed rosuvastatin at 1.8 times the rate (15.2% vs 8.3%), nebivolol at 5.4 times the rate (16.7% vs 3.1%), olmesartan at 4.5 times the rate (6.3% vs 1.4%), and desvenlafaxine at 3.4 times the rate (1.7% vs 0.5%) of physicians receiving no target meals (all comparisons, $P < .001$). All tests of trend were significant ($P < .001$).

Adjusted Analyses

In multivariable logistic regression models (Table 3), sponsored meals were associated with increased target-drug prescribing in each class ($P < .001$). Physicians receiving a single meal promoting the drug of interest were more likely to prescribe rosuvastatin over other statins (adjusted odds ratio [OR],

Table 2. Characteristics of Target-Drug-Specific Payments^a to Physicians in Each Study Group

Characteristics of Target-Drug-Specific Payments ^a	Statin Prescribers (n = 131 207)	β-Blocker Prescribers (n = 126 134)	ACE Inhibitor and ARB Prescribers (n = 131 343)	SSRI and SNRI Prescribers (n = 123 318)
Physicians receiving payments, No. (%)	15 941 (12)	3843 (3)	9483 (7)	1926 (2)
Total value of target-drug-specific payments, \$	915 728	194 052	284 335	35 382
Value of payments per physician, mean (SD), \$	58 (1075)	51 (256)	30 (61)	18 (75)
Maximum value of payments per physician, \$	62 530	4192	3815	3200
Distribution of payments, No. (%)				
Food and beverages	29 639 (99)	5001 (66)	22 858 (>99)	3012 (>99)
Education	37 (<1)	2419 (32)	81 (<1)	0 (0)
Other ^b	322 (1)	146 (2)	8 (<1)	1 (<1)
Mean value per payment, mean (SD), \$				
Sponsored meal ^c	18 (15)	13 (13)	14 (5)	12 (6)
Education	7 (5)	3 (8)	1 (1)	0
Other	1400 (7194)	850 (781)	1173 (1315)	3200 ^d
Days receiving sponsored meals for the target drug of physicians, No. (%) ^e				
0	115 275 (88)	122 702 (97)	121 874 (93)	121 393 (98)
1	9708 (7)	2571 (2)	5380 (4)	1366 (1)
2	3689 (3)	570 (<1)	1955 (1)	368 (<1)
3	1587 (1)	193 (<1)	799 (1)	99 (<1)
≥4	948 (1)	98 (<1)	1335 (1)	92 (<1)

Abbreviations: ACE, angiotensin-converting enzyme; ARB, angiotensin receptor blocker; SNRI, serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor; SSRI, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor.

^a The target drugs were rosuvastatin (Crestor) in the statin study group, nebivolol (Bystolic) in the β-blocker study group, olmesartan (Benicar) in the ACE inhibitor and ARB study group, and desvenlafaxine succinate (Pristiq) in the SSRI and SNRI study group.

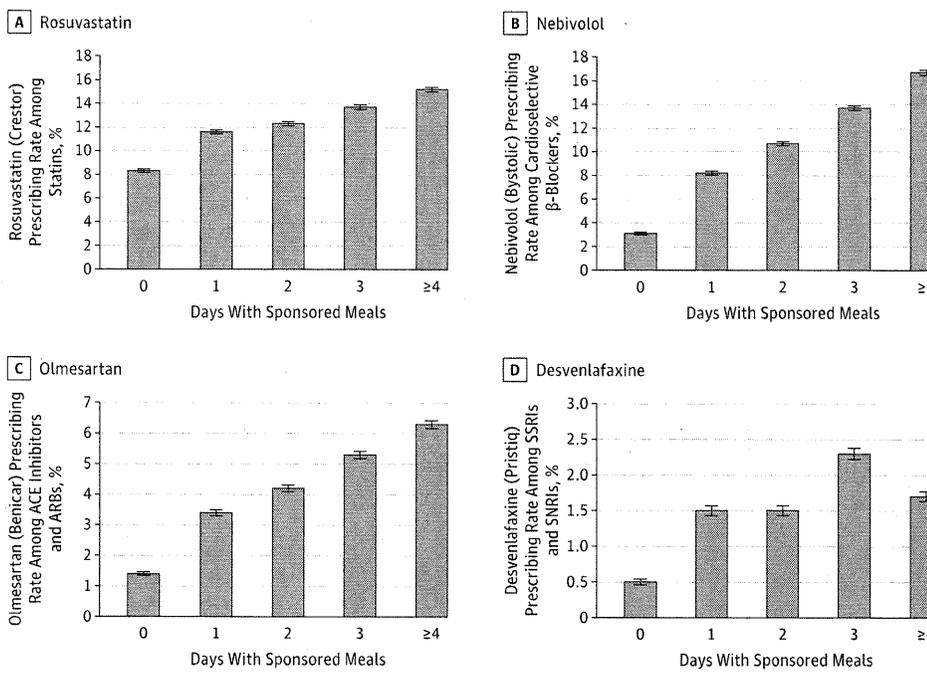
^b Other includes gifts, entertainment, travel and lodging, consulting fees, speaking fees and honoraria, charitable contributions, and space rental or facility fees.

^c Refers to the primary exposure of interest, that is, the sum of all food and beverage payments received by a physician in 1 day.

^d Because this refers to a single payment, there is no standard deviation.

^e Refers to the number of days between August 1 and December 31, 2013, in which the physician received at least 1 food or beverage payment promoting the target drug.

Figure 1. Target Branded Drugs as a Percentage of All Filled Prescriptions in the Class in 2013, Across Days Receiving Target Drug-Sponsored Meals



Filled prescriptions for each target branded drug are shown as a percentage of all prescriptions within the class, according to number of days receiving target drug-sponsored meals. A, Statins. B, Cardioselective β-blockers. C, Angiotensin-converting-enzyme inhibitors and angiotensin-receptor blockers (ACE inhibitors and ARBs). D, Selective serotonin and serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs and SNRIs). Sample sizes for Figure 1 are shown in the last 5 rows of Table 2. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

1.18; 95% CI, 1.17-1.18), nebivolol over other β-blockers (OR, 1.70; 95% CI, 1.69-1.72), olmesartan over other ACE inhibitors and ARBs (OR, 1.52; 95% CI, 1.51-1.53), and desvenlafaxine over

other SSRIs and SNRIs (OR, 2.18; 95% CI, 2.13-2.23). Additional meals were associated with greater increases in relative prescribing rates ($P < .001$).

Table 3. Predictors of Target Drug Prescribing^a

Variable	Odds Ratio (95% CI)			
	Rosuvastatin (n = 111 588)	Nebivolol (n = 116 356)	Olmesartan (n = 121 319)	Desvenlafaxine (n = 113 984)
Days receiving target-drug-sponsored meals ^b				
0	1 [Reference]	1 [Reference]	1 [Reference]	1 [Reference]
1	1.18 (1.17-1.18)	1.70 (1.69-1.72)	1.52 (1.51-1.53)	2.18 (2.13-2.23)
2	1.19 (1.19-1.20)	1.87 (1.84-1.90)	1.79 (1.77-1.81)	2.34 (2.25-2.44)
3	1.24 (1.23-1.25)	2.18 (2.13-2.24)	1.98 (1.96-2.01)	3.21 (3.03-3.41)
≥4	1.34 (1.33-1.35)	2.42 (2.34-2.51)	2.26 (2.23-2.28)	2.47 (2.32-2.63)
Sex				
Male	1 [Reference]	1 [Reference]	1 [Reference]	1 [Reference]
Female	1.05 (1.05-1.05)	0.88 (0.88-0.89)	1.05 (1.04-1.06)	0.83 (0.83-0.84)
Total volume of claims within the drug class ^c	1.01 (1.01-1.01)	1.01 (1.01-1.01)	1.03 (1.02-1.03)	1.00 (1.00-1.00)
Specialty				
Internal medicine	1 [Reference]	1 [Reference]	1 [Reference]	1 [Reference]
Family medicine and general practice	1.03 (1.03-1.03)	1.07 (1.07-1.07)	0.97 (0.96-0.97)	1.14 (1.13-1.16)
Cardiology	1.64 (1.64-1.65)	1.27 (1.26-1.28)	0.94 (0.93-0.94)	NA
Psychiatry	NA	NA	NA	6.59 (6.51-6.67)
Other	0.93 (0.92-0.93)	0.93 (0.93-0.94)	0.72 (0.72-0.73)	1.08 (1.06-1.10)
No. of members in group practice				
1	1 [Reference]	1 [Reference]	1 [Reference]	1 [Reference]
2-10	0.92 (0.91-0.92)	0.94 (0.94-0.95)	0.87 (0.86-0.87)	0.90 (0.89-0.91)
11-50	0.92 (0.91-0.92)	0.86 (0.85-0.86)	0.83 (0.82-0.83)	0.86 (0.85-0.87)
≥51	0.92 (0.92-0.92)	0.72 (0.72-0.73)	0.78 (0.77-0.78)	0.71 (0.70-0.72)
% of prescriptions for branded drugs				
<25th percentile	0.68 (0.67-0.68)	0.45 (0.45-0.45)	0.53 (0.53-0.54)	0.49 (0.48-0.49)
25th-75th percentile	1 [Reference]	1 [Reference]	1 [Reference]	1 [Reference]
≥75th percentile	1.68 (1.68-1.69)	2.27 (2.26-2.28)	1.91 (1.90-1.92)	1.76 (1.74-1.77)
Years since graduation from medical school				
0-5	1 [Reference]	1 [Reference]	1 [Reference]	1 [Reference]
6-20	1.05 (1.04-1.06)	1.19 (1.16-1.22)	1.38 (1.34-1.41)	1.28 (1.22-1.33)
≥21	1.05 (1.04-1.06)	1.14 (1.12-1.16)	1.48 (1.44-1.51)	1.30 (1.24-1.36)
Geographic region				
Northeast	1 [Reference]	1 [Reference]	1 [Reference]	1 [Reference]
Midwest	0.92 (0.91-0.92)	1.55 (1.54-1.56)	0.73 (0.72-0.73)	1.52 (1.50-1.55)
South	1.10 (1.10-1.11)	1.65 (1.64-1.66)	0.87 (0.86-0.87)	1.83 (1.81-1.86)
Pacific West	0.64 (0.64-0.64)	1.21 (1.20-1.22)	1.06 (1.05-1.06)	1.28 (1.26-1.31)
Mountain West	0.87 (0.86-0.87)	1.70 (1.68-1.72)	0.92 (0.91-0.93)	1.37 (1.34-1.41)
Population density				
Rural	1 [Reference]	1 [Reference]	1 [Reference]	1 [Reference]
Urban	1.02 (1.01-1.02)	0.94 (0.94-0.95)	1.18 (1.17-1.19)	0.89 (0.88-0.90)
Median household income in zip code ^d	0.95 (0.95-0.95)	0.98 (0.98-0.98)	0.97 (0.97-0.98)	0.93 (0.92-0.93)
% Claims for low-income subsidy beneficiaries	1.00 (1.00-1.00)	1.00 (1.00-1.00)	0.99 (0.99-0.99)	1.00 (1.00-1.00)
% Claims for Medicare Advantage Part D beneficiaries	1.00 (1.00-1.00)	1.00 (1.00-1.00)	0.99 (0.99-1.00)	1.00 (1.00-1.00)

^a Results shown are odds ratios (with 95% confidence intervals) of prescribing the target drug over alternatives within the drug class. All *P* values for coefficient estimates are <.001 except for 2 estimates (% claims for LIS beneficiaries for rosuvastatin [*P* = .14] and total volume of claims within the drug-class for desvenlafaxine [*P* = .38]).

^b Refers to the number of days between August 1 and December 31, 2013, in which the physician received at least 1 food or beverage payment promoting the target drug.

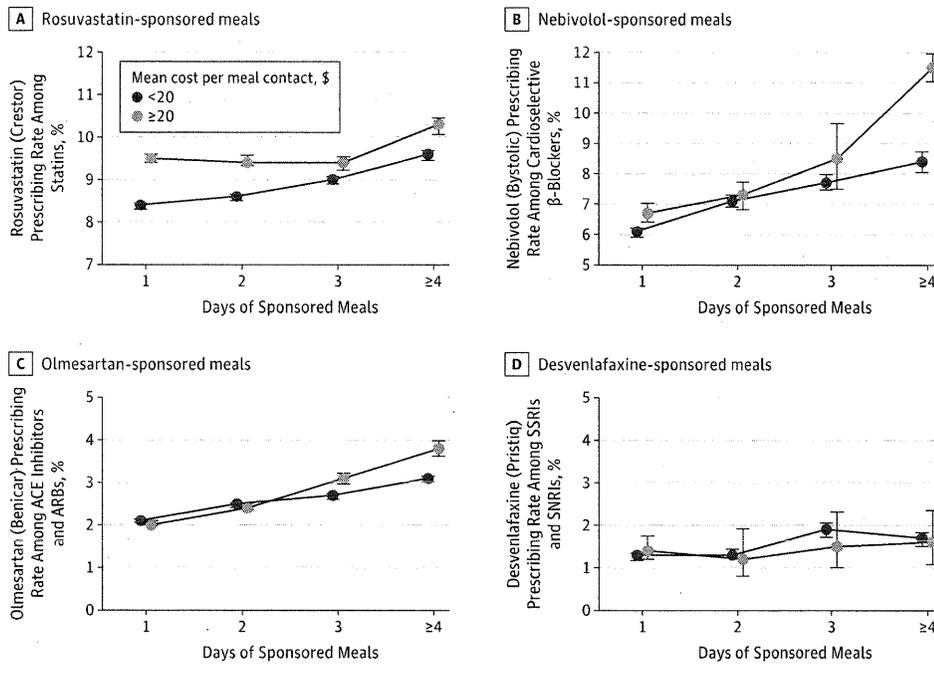
^c Prescription volume was divided by 100 to produce more meaningful odds ratios.

^d Median household income in zip code was converted to a z-score.

Figure 2 shows predicted probabilities for prescribing the target drug, according to mean cost per meal received. Receipt of costlier meals was significantly associated with in-

creased target-drug prescribing for all drugs except desvenlafaxine, with ORs ranging from 1.02 to 1.13 (eTable 3 in the Supplement). The interaction between mean cost per meal and

Figure 2. Predicted Probabilities for Prescribing the Target Drug as a Percentage of All Prescriptions in the Class, According to the Number and Cost of Sponsored Meals Received by Each Physician



The figure shows predicted probabilities for prescribing the target drug over alternatives within the treatment class, based on the cost and number of meals received promoting the target drug. Predicted probabilities are calculated for physicians with the highest-frequency values of all characteristics in Table 1 (male sex, internal medicine specialty, Southern region, urban location, group size ≥ 51 , ≥ 20 years since medical school graduation, and mean values for prescribing volume, income in zip code, and percentage of low-income subsidy and Medicare Advantage Part D patients). A, Statins. B, Cardioselective β -blockers. C, Angiotensin-converting-enzyme inhibitors and angiotensin-receptor blockers (ACE inhibitors and ARBs). D, Selective serotonin and serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs and SNRIs). Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

number of days receiving sponsored meals was also significant for all drugs except desvenlafaxine, but the interaction effects were too small to be qualitatively meaningful (data not shown).

In sensitivity analyses adjusted for propensity score decile (eTable 4 in the Supplement), receipt of meals related to target drugs was associated with increased odds of prescribing rosuvastatin (adjusted OR, 1.19; 95% CI, 1.19-1.20), nebivolol (OR, 1.79; 95% CI, 1.78-1.80), olmesartan (OR, 1.74; 95% CI, 1.73-1.75), and desvenlafaxine (OR, 2.30; 95% CI, 2.25-2.34). In falsification tests (eTable 5 in the Supplement), receiving a desvenlafaxine-related meal did not predict rosuvastatin prescribing (OR, 0.99; 95% CI, 0.98-1.00); receiving a rosuvastatin-related meal predicted desvenlafaxine prescribing, but with much smaller effect sizes than desvenlafaxine-related meals (OR, 1.22; 95% CI, 1.20-1.24 compared with OR, 2.18; 95% CI, 2.13-2.23 for desvenlafaxine-related meals).

Our findings were unchanged when study group inclusion criteria were increased from 20 to 200 prescriptions in the class (eTable 6 in the Supplement), when claims were standardized to 30-day supplies (eTable 7 in the Supplement), and in a sensitivity analysis of only high-intensity statins, with slightly smaller effect sizes (eTable 8 in the Supplement).

Other physician-level predictors of target-drug prescribing (Table 3) included high brand-name drug use across all medication classes, being in solo or small-group practice, graduating from medical school more than 5 years ago, practicing in the South, and being a psychiatrist (for desvenlafaxine) or a cardiologist (for rosuvastatin and nebivolol).

Discussion

We linked 2 national data sets to quantify the association between industry payments and physician prescribing patterns. We found that the receipt of industry-sponsored meals was associated with an increased rate of prescribing the brand-name medication that was being promoted.

As compared with the receipt of no industry-sponsored meals, we found that receipt of a single industry-sponsored meal, with a mean value of less than \$20, was associated with prescription of the promoted brand-name drug at significantly higher rates to Medicare beneficiaries. The differences persisted after controlling for prescribing volume and potential confounders such as physician specialty, practice setting, and demographic characteristics. Furthermore, the relationship was dose dependent, with additional meals and costlier meals associated with greater increases in prescribing of the promoted drug. Our findings were consistent across 4 brand-name drugs, including rosuvastatin, the third-costliest drug in Medicare Part D (\$2.2 billion in federal expenditures in 2013) after esomeprazole magnesium (Nexium) and fluticasone propionate/salmeterol (Advair Diskus).³³

Our results are consistent with recent analyses that linked federal or state-level physician payment records with Medicare Part D prescribing data. These studies found that industry payments in general (rather than payments linked to a specific drug) were associated with an overall increase in the prescribing of brand-name drugs.^{4,16,17} However, the analy-

ses did not link the promotion of specific drugs with prescribing rates for those drugs. A study of 2444 Massachusetts physicians found that for every \$1000 received from industry (for any drug), a physician's brand-name statin prescribing rate increased by 0.1%.¹⁶ In comparison, our study found a significant association between attending a single meal promoting a specific drug, with a mean value of less than \$20, and the prescribing of the promoted drug over therapeutic alternatives.

Our findings are also consistent with smaller studies that relied on physician self-report or institution-level data.¹⁰⁻¹³ In single-hospital studies, exposure to sponsored meals has been associated with increased clinic-wide use of the promoted drug,¹⁵ choice of the promoted drug when presented with a clinical scenario,³⁴ and requests to add the promoted drug to the hospital formulary.³⁵ Marketing studies demonstrate that industry outreach to physicians facilitates the adoption of new drugs³⁶; however, the content of these presentations is not actively monitored by the FDA. Industry-sponsored meals have been associated with learning inaccurate information about the sponsor's and competitor's drug³⁷ and with increased cost of prescribing.³⁸

Our data are cross-sectional. The findings reflect an association, and not necessarily causality. Because we linked 5 months of Open Payments data with 1 year of Medicare Part D prescription data, we also could not determine whether high prescription rates for brand-name drugs were preceded, followed, or temporally unrelated to the receipt of industry-sponsored meals. The policy implications of our findings thus depend on further clarification of the mechanism of the association between the receipt of industry-sponsored meals and physician prescribing behavior. If events where industry-sponsored meals are provided affect prescribing by informing physicians about new evidence and clinical guidelines, then the receipt of sponsored meals may benefit patient care. If physicians, however, choose to attend industry events where information is provided about drugs they already prefer, then meals may have no effect on prescribing patterns. If, alternatively, meals change physicians' prescribing practices as a result of promotional influence, either by encouraging future use or rewarding an ongoing preference for the promoted drug, this would be cause for concern.

Our findings support the importance of ongoing transparency efforts in the United States and Europe.^{1,3,5} Although voluntary guidelines from the Manufacturers of America allow meals and gifts to physicians of up to \$100 in value,³⁹ our findings indicate that even payments of less than \$20 are associated with different prescribing patterns. Small payments and meals should continue to be monitored in the United States

and should be incorporated into the European pharmaceutical industry's recent transparency initiative, which requires drug companies to publicly report payments to physicians with the exception of food and drinks.⁵

Future research could compare industry-sponsored meals and other methods for disseminating drug information, such as academic detailing⁴⁰ and independent drug bulletins,⁴¹ with respect to the cost and quality of prescribing. The methods used in this study could be applied to other payment types, to drugs with varying degrees of generic competition and cost-effectiveness, and to brand-name drugs that compete within the same class.

This study has several limitations. In addition to the cross-sectional design and timing of the data (5 months of payment data and 12 months of prescription data), unmeasured confounders may bias our results. The 5 months of Open Payments data may not be representative of a full year. The questions that we examined should be evaluated with alternative study designs and additional years of data. We linked data sets using physician name and location, which may have introduced inaccuracies despite exclusion of physicians with identical matching criteria. We did not measure the use of therapeutic alternatives from other drug classes, and our analysis did not differentiate between new indications and refills or adjust for physicians' patient panel size or case mix. However, case mix is unlikely to fully explain variability after controlling for physician- and panel-level characteristics. In addition, our sensitivity analysis of high-intensity statins, which was intended to make patient populations more homogenous between physicians, was consistent with our other findings.

Limitations of the Open Payments data include minimal pre-release vetting by physicians,² nonreported payments (including free drug samples and patient education materials), limited information about the accuracy of the data, and deidentified and disputed payments, which were excluded. The exemption of indirect payments with unidentifiable recipients (such as refreshments at large conferences) is a limitation but improves the precision of the database as a whole by restricting reported payments to those that can be accurately attributed.

Conclusions

The receipt of industry-sponsored meals was associated with an increased rate of prescribing the promoted brand-name medication relative to alternatives within the drug class. The findings represent an association, not a cause-and-effect relationship.

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Having Lunch with the Pharmaceutical Companies

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Last month, during a break at a 'Withdrawing from Medication' workshop we held in Holyoke, someone approached one of us to express disappointment that so few people came to an RLC outreach presentation at the provider agency where that person worked. She explained that lots of clinicians show up at pharmaceutical presentations because they provide expensive lunches that people enjoy. She suggested that perhaps we ought to consider offering another presentation to her organization with lunch included, as well. What did we think?

For better or worse, we don't have the budget to offer lunches with our outreach presentations, and it also would make many of us uncomfortable to start competing with pharmaceutical companies or replicating their methods. **In that conversation, it was suggested that another path to address the issue would be for her to propose that her organization stop accepting pharmaceutical lunches.** She responded flatly that she didn't think that was going to happen. That she did not take this suggestion seriously was not her 'fault,' but is really quite the norm based on the expectations that have been shaped by what we've been told and seen around us, and that really got some of us thinking.



As we learned from presenter David Cohen at that very same presentation, pharmaceutical companies (according to statistics from 2011) spend over \$10.5 billion per year on marketing for four classes of psychiatric drugs alone.

10.5 BILLION DOLLARS. At the same time, many psychiatrists acknowledge that much of their information about specific drugs comes from pharmaceutical representatives. These are the same representatives who are paid a large percent of that \$10.5 billion to convince people to use their product, NOT to educate and provide unbiased information.

So, do we have a right to say no to these pharmaceutical reps and their gifts of free food and other 'perks'? Yes, actually we do. Laws vary from state to state, but it's worth noting that:

- in Vermont in 2009, free meals to physicians were made illegal (see www.atg.state.vt.us/issues/pharmaceutical-manufacturer-payment-disclosure.php).
- Minnesota has similar gift ban laws, and a variety of other states have implemented various restrictions over the years (see www.healthlawyers.org/Events/Programs/Materials/Documents/PHY10/curi_ernaglia_resource%2olist.pdf).
- *In Massachusetts specifically*, meals paid for by pharmaceutical companies are not banned but do need to be declared if they are over a certain amount. Massachusetts also maintains and makes public for viewing a database with all disclosures listed (found at www.mass.gov/dph/pharmamed).

to read the rest of this article, click below:

In looking at the Massachusetts database, we found that in 2011, \$1,114,025.00 was declared by pharmaceutical companies for gifts of food. This database represents the minimum standard in the state. Pharmaceutical lunches are not illegal and may still be used as a tool, but gifts must be declared. However, there is also nothing to stop us from setting higher standards as individuals and organizations.

It's hard to be the first individual to suggest change or the first organization to implement a controversial policy, but at least one such organization already exists in our state. Around about 2006, Advocates, Inc. (based in Framingham and providing a variety of traditional services including Community Based Flexible Supports, Emergency Services, clinic services, and so on) made a decision to set their own rules about pharmaceutical gifts. They started by banning non-food gifts (pads, clocks, etc.), and eliminating attendance at pharmaceutically sponsored dinners for medical staff. In the last three years, they took another big step and banned pharmaceutical lunches.

Advocates did not come to these decisions lightly or easily, but one representative identified their motivations as follows:

- *“Our desire to respect the growing number of people we support, their friends and families, and people working here with experience using services in the mental health world, that have had serious concerns about the influence of pharma reps on the support and treatment we provide.”*
- *“Our desire to provide our medical staff with non-biased information about the medications available to be used by people with whom we work and all of their potential effects.”*
- *“Our desire to eliminate the potential for marketing information, gifts, money offered in exchange for participation in trials or speaking engagements, dinners and free lunches to influence our practice or to contribute in any way to the perception of such by the people we serve.”*

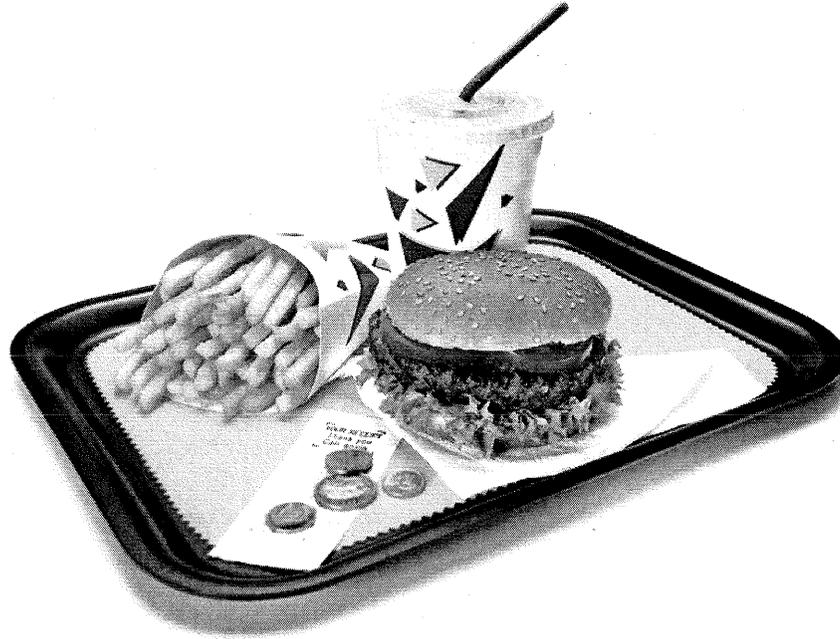
This was not an anti-medication issue for Advocates, nor should it be for the rest of us. Instead, it is about creating space for unbiased information and education, **and** evening the playing field for all of our voices to be heard around choice, self-determination and the many different paths and resources available. And, what does this mean for you?

It means you DO have the right to ask the organization that you receive services from, or that you work for, to change their practices around gifts from the pharmaceutical industry.

For more information on how Advocates went through their process, see our article here: *“Advocates, Inc. – Limiting the Influence of the Pharmaceutical Industry.”*

FORTUNE

A Cheap Lunch From a Pharma Rep Can Influence Doctors' Prescriptions



It doesn't cost much. Photograph by Peter Dazeley — Getty Images

By IAN MOUNT June 21, 2016

Here's some good news for name-brand pharmaceutical salesmen: They don't need to spend a lot to get doctors to prescribe their drugs.

A new study from JAMA Internal Medicine, published Monday, delves into the links between the money the pharma industry spends on entertaining doctors, and how often those doctors prescribe the name-brand drugs of the companies that entertain them.

Using Medicare's Open Payments data—which tracks money spent by the drug industry on physician research activities, gifts, speaking fees, meals, travel, and the like—they study's authors looked at four target drugs in four categories: cholesterol fighting statins, antidepressants, and two kinds of blood pressure drugs. The researchers found a total of 279,669 physicians who received 63,524 payments associated with the four target drugs. The vast majority—95%— of those payments came in the form of meals, and the average value of those meals was less than \$20.

The doctors in the study turned out to be cheap dates.

The researchers found that doctors who were treated to a meal that was meant to promote the drug tended to prescribe that drug over equivalents. They were 18% more likely to prescribe Crestor (from AstraZeneca (AZNCF, +0.57%)) over over statins; 70% more likely to prescribe Bystolic (from Forest Laboratories) over other beta blockers; 52% more likely to prescribe Benicar (from Daiichi Sankyo) over other ACE inhibitors; and 118% more likely to prescribe Pristiq (from Pfizer (PFE, +0.49%)) over comparable antidepressants.

The authors noted:

As compared with the receipt of no industry-sponsored meals, we found that receipt of a single industry-sponsored meal, with a mean value of less than \$20, was associated with prescription of the promoted brand-name drug at significantly higher rates to Medicare beneficiaries.

And they found that giving doctors more free meals, or meals costing more than \$20, was “associated with higher relative prescribing rates.”

The Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA), a trade group, disputed the implication that the industry was manipulating physician prescription behavior for economic reasons.

“This study cherry-picks physician prescribing data for a subset of medicines to advance a false narrative,” a spokeswoman said in a prepared statement. “Manufacturers routinely engage with physicians to share drug safety and efficacy information, new indications for approved medicines and potential side effects of medicines. As the study says, the exchange of this critical information could impact physicians’ prescribing decisions in an effort to improve patient care.”

This story has been updated with PhRMA’s response.

Buying Lunch Might Help Drug Makers Win Over Doctors Who Have Little Reason To Prescribe Their Brand



Rita Rubin Contributor ⓘ
Pharma & Healthcare

TWEET THIS

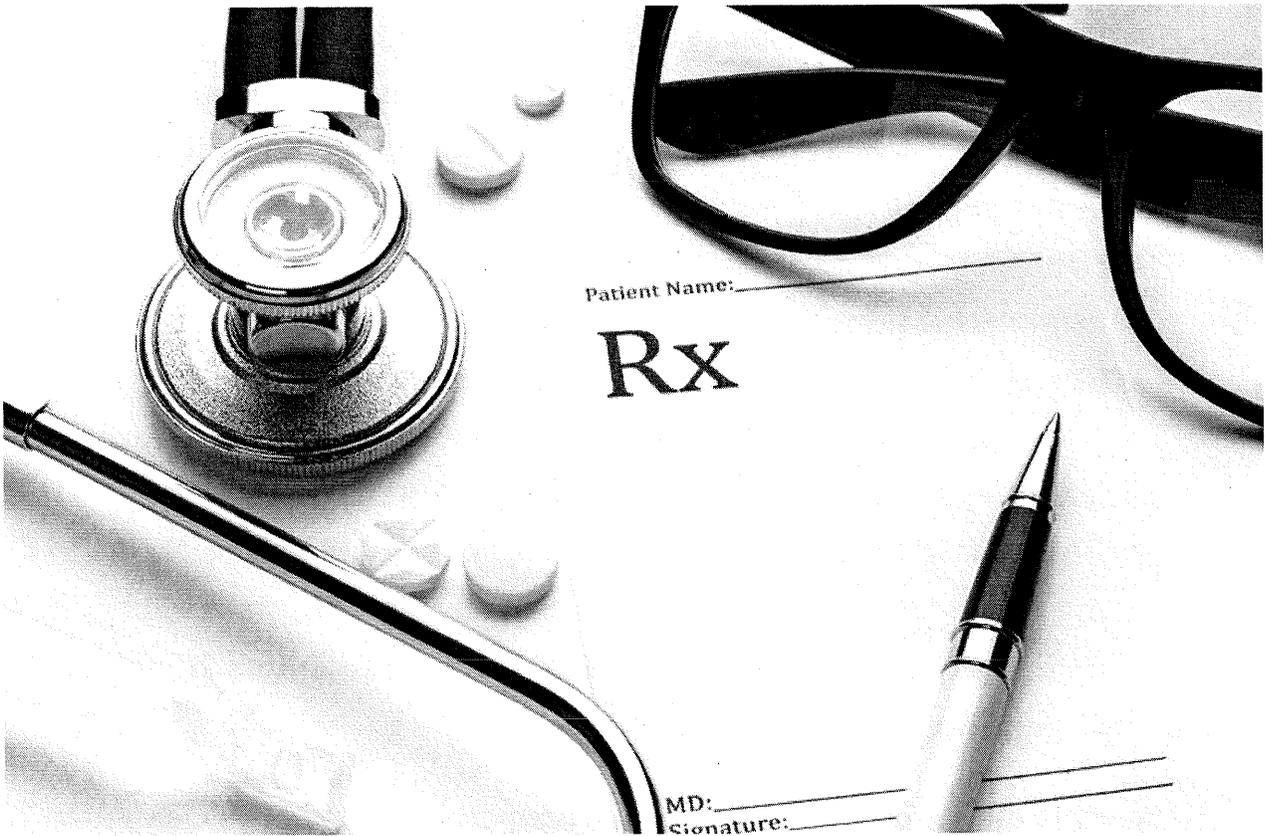


"You're thinking, 'I'm about to have a meatball sandwich,' but then the drug rep is there."

A study out Monday brings new meaning to the old saying that there's no such thing as a free lunch.

University of California, San Francisco , researchers found that doctors who accepted even a single free lunch (or, for that matter, free dinner) from pharmaceutical companies were more likely to prescribe their host's pricey brand-name drug to Medicare beneficiaries instead of a cheaper, equally effective generic alternative. And generally, as the number and cost of the meals they accepted increased, so did the likelihood that physicians would prescribe the host's drug.

Drug makers buy a lot of meals for physicians. According to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, in the last five months of 2013, companies paid 470,000 doctors--equal to a little more than half of the total who are professionally active, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation--and 1,000 teaching hospitals a total of \$3.47 billion.



Researchers found that taking just one free meal from a pharmaceutical company was linked to doctors' greater likelihood of prescribing their host's drug. (Shutterstock photo)

DeJong, Dudley and their coauthors focused on four drugs that had earned Food and Drug Administration approval five to 11 years before the period they studied. In 2013, they were the most-prescribed brand-name products in four drug categories in Medicare Part D, which covers prescription medications, although they represented a fairly small proportion of prescriptions in each category.

The question is why they were prescribed at all. "There is limited, mixed, or contrary evidence about the superiority of these four drugs over generic alternatives," the researchers wrote, as illustrated by the fact that the Department of Veterans Affairs medical system excludes them from the list of drugs doctors can prescribe. Plus, Dudley said, the United Kingdom's National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, or NICE, a government agency that produces practice guidelines, recommends that doctors prescribe generic alternatives instead any of the four brand-name drugs he studied.

These are the four drugs and categories on which the UCSF researchers focused:

- Rosuvastatin (AstraZeneca 's Crestor), accounting for 8.8% of all prescriptions for cholesterol-lowering statins. As you can see from the chart below, Medicare paid more for Crestor in 2013 than all but two other prescription drugs.
- Nebivolol (Forest Laboratories FRX +0% ' Bystolic), accounting for 3.3% of beta-blocker prescriptions.
- Olmesartan medoxomil (Daiichi Sankyo 's Benicat), accounting for 1.6% of prescriptions for blood pressure-lowering medications called ACE inhibitors and angiotensin II receptor blockers, or ARBs.
- Desven succinate (Pfizer PFE +0.48% 's Pristiq), accounting for 0.6% of prescriptions for antidepressants called serotonin reuptake inhibitors, or SSRIs, and serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors, or SNRIs.

Prescription Drugs With The Largest Medicare Bill | HealthGrove

To quantify the connection between industry payments and physician prescribing habits, the researchers linked the Medicare Part D data with the 2013 Open Payments database, which contains information reported by manufacturers about the value of payments to physicians and the drug or device that was promoted.

They found that 279,669 doctors received 63,524 payments associated with the four target drugs, and 95% of those payments came in the form of meals whose average value was less than \$20 (guidelines from the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, or PhRMA, allow meals and gifts to physicians worth up to \$100, the study authors write, while the most recent American Medical Association's opinion says it's okay for physicians to accept an in-kind gift of "minimal value" only if it will "directly benefit patients, including patient education").

Compared to physicians who accepted no drug industry-sponsored meals, those who took just one meal prescribed the promoted brand-name drug at significantly higher rates to Medicare beneficiaries. Those who received meals related to a targeted drug on four or more days were 1.8 times more likely to prescribe Crestor, 5.4 times more likely to prescribe Bystolic, 4.5 times more likely to prescribe Benicat and 3.4 times more likely to prescribe Pristiq, compared to

doctors who took no meals. Prescribing differences between the physicians who accepted meals and those who didn't held up even after the researchers accounted for other possible confounding factors, such as medical specialty, practice setting and demographic characteristics, including years in practice and location.

Holly Campbell, a spokeswoman for PhRMA, a trade association of prescription drug makers, said physicians' prescribing decisions involve an array of factors based on individual patients' needs, including drug interactions, side effects and contraindications, articles in peer-reviewed medical journals and clinical practice guidelines. (True, but it seems that physicians across the board would take those factors into account, raising questions about what else could explain why those who accepted free meals were more likely to prescribe the brand-name drugs.)

"This study cherry-picks physician prescribing data for a subset of medicines to advance a false narrative," Campbell told me in an email. "Manufacturers routinely engage with physicians to share drug safety and efficacy information, new indications for approved medicines and potential side effects of medicines."

In their paper, Dudley and DeJong acknowledged that could be the case. "It isn't unreasonable to say that doctors might need more education about drugs," Dudley told me. "You could imagine that there might be some educational gains to having the drug reps out there." However, he emphasized that the four drugs targeted in his study had been on the market for years, enough time for physicians to get up to speed on them.

And, as DeJong had noted, company representatives might not exactly be unbiased sources of information about drugs, because that's one type of marketing the FDA doesn't regulate. For that reason, a few physicians have developed convenient sources of information, not tied to drug manufacturers, for time-pressed colleagues who don't have the luxury of plowing through all of the medical literature.

For example, Dr. Jerry Avorn, chief of the Division of Pharmacoepidemiology and Pharmacoeconomics at the Brigham & Women's, a Harvard-affiliated hospital in Boston, pioneered "academic detailing." In academic detailing, specially trained

educators, not pharmaceutical sales reps, meet with physicians to help them make evidence-based decisions about what to prescribe their patients. And Woloshin and his wife, Dr. Lisa Schwartz, both of whom are professors of medicine and of community and family medicine at Dartmouth, have created and trademarked DrugFactsBoxes, modeled after nutrition labeling on food products, for both physicians and consumers. While their company is for-profit, they say they take no money from the pharmaceutical industry or from industry critics.

In an "Editor's Note" accompanying Dudley and DeJong's paper, published online first by *JAMA Internal Medicine*, editor-at-large Dr. Robert Steinbrook noted that neither their study nor any other has established a "cause-and-effect" relationship between drug companies treating physicians to meals and higher rates of prescribing brand-name medications. Perhaps physicians chose to attend industry events such as dinners where information is provided about brand-name drugs they already prefer, so the free meals might have no effect on their prescribing patterns, Dudley and DeJong write.

Whether industry payments to physicians, such as picking up the dinner tab, cause them to prescribe particular drugs might not even matter, Steinbrook suggested.

"Outright gifts, such as meals, may be legal, but why should physicians either expect or accept them?" he wrote. "If drug and device manufacturers were to stop sending money to physicians for promotional speaking, meals and other activities without clear medical justifications and invest more in independent bona fide research on safety, effectiveness and affordability, our patients and the health care system would be better off."



Rita Rubin Contributor

I've been a journalist ever since I edited my elementary school newspaper in Wheeling, W.Va. My father was an ob-gyn, which helps explain why I gravitated toward coverin... [Read More](#)



A single free meal may sway doctors' prescribing habits, JAMA study suggests

Researchers analyzed 63,500 reported payments to nearly 280,000 physicians

10:30 AM - June 22, 2016

U.S. physicians who received just one meal paid for by a drugmaker were more likely to prescribe the brand-name drug being promoted by that manufacturer over a less costly generic version, according to a study published Monday in *JAMA Internal Medicine*.

Study details

For the study, researchers from the **University of California** and **University of Hawaii** reviewed 2013 Medicare Part D data from **CMS's** Open Payments System. They analyzed about 63,500 reported payments to nearly 280,000 physicians from the manufacturers of four of the most-prescribed brand-name drugs. Those drugs are:

- Benicar and Bystolic, both blood pressure drugs;
- Crestor, a cholesterol-lowering drug; and
- Pristiq, an antidepressant.

"There is limited, mixed, or contrary evidence about the superiority of these four drugs over generic alternatives, and all four are excluded from the national formulary for the **U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs** medical system," the study authors wrote.

Findings

The study found that of the more than 60,000 payments to physicians associated with the four drugs, 95 percent were made in the form of drugmaker-sponsored meals, which each averaged less than \$20 in value.

According to the study, physicians who received one such meal were more likely to prescribe the brand-name drug the manufacturer was promoting than those who did not receive sponsored meals. The study found that when physicians received one meal from a drugmaker, the probability of prescribing the drug promoted by that manufacturer increased by:

- 118 percent for Pristiq;
- 70 percent for Bystolic;
- 52 percent for Benicar; and
- 18 percent for Crestor.

According to the study, prescribing rates for brand-name drugs increased as the number of meals and meal value increased. However, the likelihood of prescribing Pristiq decreased after physicians received a third meal sponsored by the drugmaker. Study co-author Colette DeJong says that could be because Pristiq had the lowest absolute prescription rate among the four drugs.

Comments

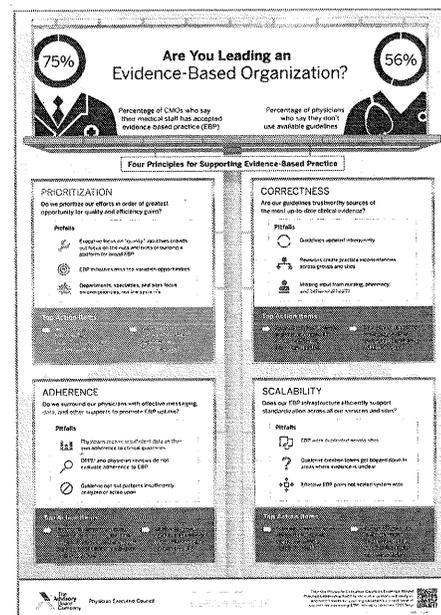
Study co-author Adam Dudley says that while the brand-name drugs aren't "medically bad" for patients, the medications "definitely cos[t] them more." He suggests that patients should "always ask if there's a generic that's just as good."

DeJong adds that the researchers do not believe the meals themselves influence prescribing behavior. "There's really no way that a \$10 bagel sandwich can influence a doctor in a gift way," she says. "We think it represents more reciprocity, the time spent with the drug rep and the fact that the doctor is listening to this 10-minute pitch."

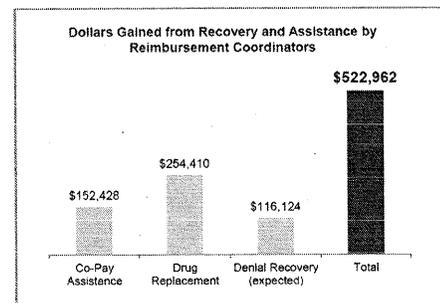
In an accompanying editorial, *JAMA Internal Medicine* Editor-at-Large Robert Steinbrook notes that the findings are similar to another recent study in *JAMA Internal Medicine* and a March 2016 *ProPublica* analysis.

Steinbrook notes that "none of these studies have established a cause-and-effect relationship," although the most recent study posits that "physicians may choose to attend industry events where information is provided about drugs that they already prefer." Regardless of whether such a relationship could be proven, Steinbrook argues that even though "outright gifts, such as meals, may be legal," doctors should not "either expect or accept them."

Steinbrook adds, "If drug and device manufacturers were to stop sending money to physicians for promotional speaking, meals, and other activities without clear medical justifications and invest more in independent bona fide research on safety, effectiveness, and affordability, our patients and the health care system would be better off."



Are you leading an evidence-based organization?

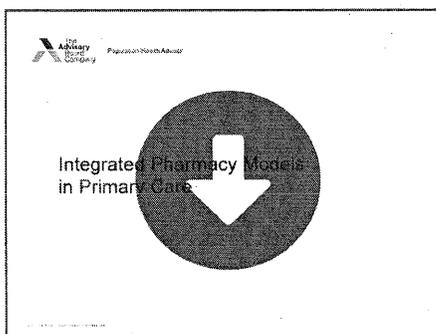


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Meanwhile, **Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America** spokesperson Holly Campbell, says the study "cherry-picks physician-prescribing data for a subset of medicines to advance a false narrative."

She adds, "Manufacturers routinely engage with physicians to share drug safety and efficacy information, new indications for approved medicines, and potential side effects of medicines. As the study says, the exchange of this critical information could impact physicians' prescribing decisions in an effort to improve patient care" (Johnson, "Wonkblog," *Washington Post*, 6/20; Loftus, *Wall Street Journal*, 6/20; Bakalar, "Well," *New York Times*, 6/20; Tanner, *AP/Washington Times*, 6/20; Ornstein, *ProPublica*, 6/20; Doyle, *Reuters*, 6/20; Steinbrook, *JAMA Internal Medicine*, 6/20).

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