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Ban urged for gifts to doctors, med students

By **Eric Eyre**

Staff writer

West Virginia has taken small steps to limit the influence of prescription drug and medical device companies on doctors and medical school students, but the state should adopt much tougher restrictions to stop the "insidious" practices, a leader of a consumer advocacy group said Thursday.

Marcia Hams, assistant director of a Boston-based organization called the Prescription Project at Community Catalyst, said the pharmaceutical and medical device industries give gifts, meals and other freebies to doctors to influence what they prescribe.

The practice compromises patient care and drives up health-care costs, she said.

"We really see this as part of the problem that's affecting problems of trust in the medical profession and it's costly to all of us," Hams said. "We're not getting the safest and most cost-effective drugs."

Hams planned to speak today at the University of Charleston pharmacy school during a meeting of the National Legislative Association on Prescription Drug Prices. Lawmakers and their staff members from across the United States are taking part. State Sen. Dr. Dan Foster, D-Kanawha, is helping to organize the meeting.

"Clearly, prescription drugs have great positive impact," Foster said Thursday. "But we need to restore proper balance in terms of how people get information and how physicians make their decision in what they prescribe."

Hams praised West Virginia for being one of only six states that require drug companies to disclose financial relationships with physicians - although individual doctors aren't named. Minnesota is the only state that now lists physicians' names, she said.

Last year, a national medical student group gave West Virginia University and Marshall University medical schools failing grades when it comes to limiting drug companies' influence on campus. But Hams noted that the medical schools are reviewing their policies and may adopt restrictions.

Last week, an influential college association recommended that medical schools ban drug and medical device companies from offering free food, gifts and travel to doctors and students. The Association of American Medical Colleges is expected to vote on the ban in June.

Hams' group is supporting the AAAMC recommendations and has developed guidelines to help medical schools restrict freebies.

Medical students start receiving gifts and free lunches at many campuses the moment they start school, she said.

"There should be no gifts of any value," Hams said. "The research has shown that even small gifts create a sense of obligation. That's why the industry uses them."

Hams said drug companies spend 14 percent of their budgets on research and development, and 30 percent on marketing and advertising. "That's completely an imbalance," she said.

Hams said the industry also spends \$16 million to \$18 million a year distributing free drug samples. About three-quarters of those samples don't go to low-income and uninsured patients, she said.

Also, patients who receive the samples often wind up paying higher prices for the drugs in the long run because they didn't buy cheaper generics.

"The problem is when it's used by the sales rep to get in the door," Hams said.

Hams said many physicians have gotten so used to receiving gifts that they believe they're entitled to them.

"This has become accepted in the medical profession," she said. "It's insidious. There's a sense of entitlement."