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## **Ex-drug salesman: We lured docs with gifts Companies recruit 'beautiful people' as reps**

By Christine McConville | Sunday, March 30, 2008

We all want to think that our doctors prescribe pain pills for our aching backs because it's what we need, and not because a charming ex-cheerleader turned drug company sales rep has invited him to a **Red Sox** [team stats] game.

But, according to a former drug salesman, that second scenario may be closer to the truth.

"We were the beautiful people," Shahram Ahari, a former Eli Lilly "drug detailer," told a group of Boston University medical students last week.

Ahari, who spent two years promoting drugs such as Prozac and Zyprexa, is telling the medical students what to watch out for when the sales reps come calling.

He is working with The Prescription Project, a group fighting the impact of pharmaceutical marketing on physicians' prescription decisions.

The group contends that aggressive marketing to physicians by pharmaceutical companies creates conflicts of interest in the medical profession and raises questions about the appropriateness of treatment choices.

Many blame drug companies' aggressive marketing efforts for a portion of the rise in health-care costs, because physicians are swayed into prescribing newer, more expensive medicines instead of older, less expensive brands.

To push their products, Ahari said, drug companies hire former models, cheerleaders and athletes to promote the new drugs to doctors.

His co-workers, he said, "were all beautiful, vivacious and fun," but none of them had more than a high-school level science education.

Still, each day, they'd visit scores of medical offices, armed with gifts for the doctors, their staff and their family members, and samples of the drugs they were pushing.

When they weren't treating the entire office to lunch, or handing out free tickets to sporting events, they'd wine and dine the doctors.

Ahari said he was allowed to spend \$60,000 a year on meals.

Eli Lilly spokeswoman Judy Moore disputed Ahari's account, saying that the company's sales reps provide a "value-added resource for physicians."

Ahari said most physicians think they are too smart to be influenced, but drug companies have learned otherwise from experience.

After a drug manufacturer took a group of physicians to an all-expenses-paid conference in the Caribbean, those same physicians began prescribing that drug in earnest.

“Physicians can be influenced like everyone else,” Ahari said. “We paid for that conference with all the prescriptions that came in the next month.”

Moore countered that Lilly’s sales reps help very busy physicians learn more about the cutting-edge products.

“Our reps know the products inside and out. They are professional, passionate and hard-working,” she said.

Here in Massachusetts, the state Senate has just rolled out its plan to contain the growth in health-care costs. The plan calls for an outright ban on pharmaceutical marketing gifts.

If approved, Massachusetts will be the first state to prohibit pharmaceutical sales reps from offering gifts and will ban physicians, their family and staff from accepting them. The bill also calls for uniform, electronic medical records and other cost-saving measures.