

Upstate gets healthy mark on ethics

Group rates medical schools' dealings with pharmaceutical representatives.

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SUNY Upstate Medical University is doing better than most U.S. medical schools at addressing conflicts of interest caused by pharmaceutical industry marketing, according to the American Medical Student Association.

That group surveyed 150 medical schools and found only 21 have strong policies regarding interaction with drug company representatives, free drug samples and other related issues. Upstate was one of the 21.

Seven medical schools got a grade of "A" on the "pharm-free" scorecard and 14 schools, including Upstate, got "B's." Upstate, Mount Sinai and Columbia University were the only New York medical schools that got passing grades.

"It's nice to have a 'B' rather than anything lower, but it would have been nice to have an 'A,'" said Dr. Lynn Cleary, Upstate's senior associate dean for education. She said Upstate needs to do a better job of coordinating its policies across all departments.

The association collaborated with The Prescription Project, an industry watchdog group working to eliminate conflicts of interest in medicine, to develop a methodology and an interactive Web site (www.amsascorecard.org) that evaluates each school's policies in 11 areas.

The scorecard evaluates restrictions on gifts, paid speaking for products, industry-funded education and other criteria.

At Upstate, drug company representatives are not allowed on campus to visit doctors unless they have appointments. Upstate also strongly discourages the use of sample drugs. Samples can only be given to patients who lack prescription coverage and cannot be issued without written permission of the pharmacy director.

The pharmaceutical industry spends an estimated \$28 billion to \$46 billion per year marketing to doctors - or about \$35,000 per doctor, according to the association. More than 100,000 pharmaceutical sales representatives regularly visit U.S. doctors, providing free lunches, gifts, drug samples and literature to promote their products, the association said.

All that marketing shapes doctors' prescribing habits, Cleary said. "What you are exposed to influences what you do," she said.

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