

## Drug group urges limits on gifts to doctors

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Some of those pens, pads and clocks plastered with drug logos could disappear from your doctor's office under voluntary marketing restrictions issued Thursday by the nation's biggest drug industry trade group.

Drug salespeople would also be forbidden to take doctors out for restaurant meals under the suggested code of conduct announced by the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America.

The group said it is inviting its members to tighten their policies on gifts to physicians in response to public concerns that drug company marketing is warping prescribing patterns. The pharmaceutical industry has been accused of pushing medicines that are more expensive and sometimes less effective than other drugs by showering physicians with freebies, including items such as luxury trips.

"Although our member companies have long been committed to responsible marketing of the life-enhancing and life-saving medicines they develop, we have heard the voices of policymakers, health care professionals and others telling us we can do better," said group President Billy Tauzin. "This updated code fortifies our companies' commitment to ensure their medicines are marketed in a manner that benefits patients and enhances the practice of medicine."

Allan Coukell, director of policy for the Prescription Project, a health watchdog group in Boston, welcomed the announcement. "We are thrilled that the pharmaceutical industry has finally acknowledged that they have been operating in a way that doesn't serve the needs of patients and the health care community," he said.

However, drugmakers often work outside the group's voluntary guidelines, said Mike Russo of the California consumer group CalPIRG.

Drug companies are legally free to give doctors goods or money in any amount except in Minnesota, the only state that caps the value of gifts. A proposed California law to limit the value of gifts to physicians was rejected by the state Legislature in April, said Russo. That bill would also have required drug companies to disclose their gifts to doctors.

However, Congress is considering passage of a national disclosure law called the Physician Payments Sunshine Act. Under the law, drug companies would have to report any gifts worth more than \$500, including cash, travel, meals, company stock, services, consulting fees and other payments to physicians. Patients would be able to look up the gifts given their own doctors on a government Web site.

The pharmaceutical group said it supports the current Senate version of the bill. This reflects its "position that appropriate transparency in relationships with health care professionals can help build and maintain patient trust in the health care system," the group said in a statement.

Dr. Brian Hurley, president of the American Medical Student Association, said the current bill, S2029, has been weakened since it was proposed last year. Hurley said gifts of less than \$500 should be reported, and cash penalties for hiding company gifts should be raised. Still, the medical students group backs the bill. "At this point we think it would be enough of a step forward that they should pass it," Hurley said.

Opponents of the gifts to doctors plan to propose stricter restrictions in future sessions of Congress.

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