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Pfizer accused of "influencing" Canadian doctors with payment for survey

Article | 13 February 2006

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Global drug giant Pfizer has come under attack in the Canadian daily newspaper the National Post for offering C\$275.00 (\$239.94) to general practitioners and cardio-logists, in return for their participation in a marketing exercise that is alleged to be "highly unethical."

Doctors are said to have been induced to prescribe a drug for cardiac treatment. The pharmaceutical firm says that the survey does not breach ethical guidelines. Concerns about Canadian doctors being influenced to prescribe a drug against their better judgement because 120 GPs and cardiologists had been reimbursed for their time in taking part in a survey, were unfounded, according to Pfizer.

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Colin Rose, a cardiologist based at the Montreal, Canada-based McGill University has promised to hand over his fee to the university where he works, and complained to Canada's pharmaceutical industry trade body, the Research-Based Pharmaceutical Companies (Rx&D).

Survey was "inducement to prescribe" Caduet

Dr Rose complained that the question wording was leading respondents to give a positive response, and that the financial incentive to take part in the survey was an attempt to win over doctors to Caduet, a combination drug of Norvasc (amlodipine besylate) and Lipitor (atorvastatin calcium). In addition, he claimed that the payment for 20 minutes taken to complete a questionnaire was more than compensation for time spent and could be considered an inducement to prescribe.

The first part of the survey, Dr Rose told the Daily Post, consisted of general questions about cardiac treatment. However, he said that the second part was "disguised advertising" promoting the use of stains.

The Montreal-based cardiologist recently co-authored in the Canadian Medical Association Journal, a critique of statins in treating high cholesterol, arguing that the benefits in reducing

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cardiac deaths is broadly matched by deaths from the side effects of statins.

In response, Silvie Letendre, senior corporate affairs manager for Pfizer Canada, told the Marketletter that the on-line survey was designed to evaluate the effectiveness of corporate statements about Caduet.

She said: "the survey was designed to take approximately 45 minutes. This information was disclosed to participants at the time of screening." Refuting the suggestion that Pfizer was trying to induce Canadian doctors into prescribing Caduet, Ms Letendre derided the notion of targeting 120 doctors for persuasion as incredible.

Payments met ethical guidelines, says Pfizer

A sample of 60 general practitioners out of more than 31,000 and 60 of Canada's 1,050 cardiologists was selected as part of a global exercise involving similar surveys in Australia, France, Spain and Taiwan. Ms Letendre told the Daily Post that the Rx&D's ethics guidelines allow companies to pay doctors at their standard hourly rate for participating. The Pfizer spokesman also told the Marketletter that "per standard practise, specialists are compensated more than family physicians. I am not aware of any other participants having made a complaint on this survey."

Rx&D did not respond to the Marketletter's request for confirmation that a complaint had been made, or whether Pfizer's survey complied with the trade body's ethical guidelines.

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