

# Position paper on the relationship with the pharmaceutical industry

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## 1. Introduction

From the very beginning of our studies, we as medical students are exposed to the pharmaceutical industry, be that through direct contact at events sponsored by said industry or indirectly through mentions in presentations by our teachers. However, most medical students do not obtain adequate education on how to analyse and critically respond to pharmaceutical promotion.

As future healthcare professionals, we are poorly informed about the effects of pharmaceutical marketing, such as the negative impact on health outcomes of individuals and communities, possible increase of the costs of healthcare systems as well as the reduced trust in healthcare professionals in fear that the treating physician is not impartial<sup>1</sup>.

Despite it being a well-known fear, no national studies exist which analyse the impact of the pharmaceutical industry on medical students and future effect of such interactions. The sources within Switzerland on the topic can often not be considered reliable.

The accessibility of safe and efficient medication is fundamental in every individual's right to enjoy optimal physical and mental health. It is of vital importance that medication is prescribed and administered rationally and independent from economic interests. As future experts in the medical field, we are obligated to be consciously aware of how crucial a personalised and optimal treatment, with a focus on reasonable cost-benefit ratio and as few side effects as possible, is for every single patient.

## 2. Call to Action

swimsa as the representation of almost 10'000 medical students recognizes the effect the pharmaceutical industry can have on medical students and healthcare professionals as well as the lack of thorough sensibilisation on the topic.

### **swimsa demands that...**

1. ... medical faculties in Switzerland strive to be independent and reduce the influence from the side of the pharmaceutical industry to an absolute minimum and address and declare any possible influence in a transparent manner.
2. ... future and junior healthcare professionals in Switzerland receive proper training in analysing and processing information shared by the pharmaceutical industry.

3. ...future and junior healthcare professionals in Switzerland receive training in communicating with the pharmaceutical industry.

### **swimsa recognizes that...**

1. ... we as medical students are not sufficiently taught on how to critically analyse information from pharmaceutical marketing.
2. ... pharmaceutical marketing can have adverse effects such as:
  - a. a negative impact on the health of patients
  - b. increased costs of the healthcare system
  - c. reduced trust in healthcare professionals due to fear of lacking impartiality.
3. ... it is our role as future healthcare professionals to ensure unbiased, evidence-based decision making in treatment of our patients.
4. ... there is a lack of national studies on the influence of pharmaceutical industry during medical studies.

### **swimsa demands that...**

*...of universities, especially medical faculties, that...*

1. ... a reasonable sensibilisation to pharmaceutical promotion and its effects are included in the curriculum of every healthcare profession. Options include but are not limited to:
  - a. The usage of the manual provided by the WHO/Health Action International « Understanding and Responding to Pharmaceutical Promotion: A Practical Guide »<sup>2</sup> which emphasises the care that goes into the relation between experts in the medical field and the pharmaceutical industry.
  - b. Lectures in which students learn to critically analyse articles and studies that were financed by the pharmaceutical industry.<sup>1</sup>
  - c. Inspiration gathered through the exchange with other domestic and foreign universities.
2. ... the installation of a system, initiated by academic professors and other lecturers, in which present or past conflicts of interest and relations with the pharmaceutical industry can be voiced, if said conflicts of interest and relations could, have, or will infringe on the neutrality and objectivity of the curriculum.
3. ... interfaculty collaboration with future healthcare professionals is fostered to ensure thorough knowledge-sharing on the topic.
4. ... a nation-wide study on the presumed influence of the pharmaceutical industry on future healthcare professionals is initiated.

*...from the hospitals and the service providers that...*

1. ... any influence by the pharmaceutical industry, if cannot be prevented, is addressed and declared in a transparent matter.

2. ... employed healthcare professionals receive proper training in dealing with representatives of the pharmaceutical industry.

... from the federal government that...

1. ... the impact of the pharmaceutical industry on healthcare within Switzerland is recognised as an issue worth communicating.
2. ... the execution of nation-wide studies on the effects of pharmaceutical industry marketing to medical students and healthcare professionals is supported.

### swimsa is committed to...

1. ... supporting the efforts of medical faculties in Switzerland in contributing to the information of future doctors on the influence of the pharmaceutical industry.
2. ... ensuring freedom from conflict of interest in the following manner:
  - a. abstaining from long-term sponsorship and/or partnership agreements with the pharmaceutical industry.
  - b. ensuring that sponsoring of events (e.g. the SMSC) by the pharmaceutical industry is kept as last resort as per the guidelines.
  - c. inclusion of programs centred around the sensibilisation to pharmaceutical promotion in the activities of swimsa, especially during the SMSC.

## 3. Discussion

### Role of the pharmaceutical industry

The role and influence of the pharmaceutical industry in healthcare cannot be ignored. In the past centuries, the creation of new medicines has led to a number of improvements in the health of patients.<sup>2</sup> However, the commercialisation of the industry has led to tensions due to the pressure to promote sales within a competitive market<sup>2</sup>.

### Lack of information

During our studies, we medical students are insufficiently taught how to recognise and respond to pharmaceutical promotions. In a 2014 study conducted in France, as many as 85.2% of medical students reported feeling inadequately educated about the pharmaceutical industry and possible conflicts of interest.<sup>1</sup> As part of the Health Action International initiative, a study was conducted on how the pharmaceutical industry influences medical students. Subsequently, a proposition for the development of the curriculum of medical schools on this topic was proposed. The results strongly suggested that through education, medical students can be prepared and equipped with skills to identify and respond to pharmaceutical promotion.<sup>2</sup>

There is a significant lack of knowledge about what happens in Research and Development (R&D), i.e. the process that allows for new drugs and medical devices to be put on the market.

For example, many people do not know that a new medicine does not have to be proven to be better than an already existing one treating the same condition. This frequently leads to the misconception that new equals better. The knowledge on how to assess a study published and on how to compare the effects of the medication is frequently not sufficient.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, the lack of knowledge is backed up by few current studies assessing the effects of pharmaceutical promotion. This is specifically evident for Switzerland, where no current such studies could be found.

Lastly, many students have realised that there is a lack of learning possibilities when it comes to the relationship with the pharmaceutical industry. This lack of information has led students from different healthcare professions to create their own initiatives; one notable example is Universities Allied for Essential Medicines (UAEM), a student-led organisation which, among other things, aims to promote knowledge on the pharmaceutical industry.<sup>3</sup>

## **Influence of medical students and doctors**

In a 2007 study<sup>4</sup> in the US, it was reported that as many as 8 out of 10 physicians have received gifts or free medicine samples from pharmaceutical representatives and 3 out of 10 acted as paid consultants for a pharmaceutical company. The latter is frequently not openly disclosed, as the spokespeople are called “key opinion leaders” and many doctors are unaware of the sales nature of the talks. A study contacted by the SRF/RTS in 2014 seems to confirm a similar development in Switzerland, with fewer official sales representatives and more “opinion leaders” present.<sup>5</sup>

Many forms of marketing to healthcare professionals include non-traditional forms. The practical guide by the WHO and HAI<sup>2</sup> has identified the following main ones:

- Industry-sponsored continuing medical and pharmacy education
- Funding of key physician “opinion leaders”
- Ghost-writing of journal articles
- Funding of diagnostic and treatment guideline development
- Public relations campaigns including unbranded “disease-oriented” advertising
- Funding of patient groups and medical societies
- Market seeding research (“Phase IV” studies without clear scientific objectives)
- Internet advertising
- Journal supplements and free journals
- Pharmacy discounts linked to sales volume

The fear of being influenced by the promotional strategies of pharmaceutical companies remains persistent in medical students, with a 2012 survey showing 24.6% of German medical students believing gifts would influence their own future prescribing behaviour, and 45.1% believing gifts would influence their classmates’ future prescribing behaviour.<sup>6</sup>

Multiple studies have shown that students come into contact with pharmaceutical marketing early on in their study programs. A large percentage of assistant physicians and students do

not feel adequately informed about the effects that interactions with the private sector can have, and how to deal with said effects. This lack of information and training may have negative consequences: medical students subconsciously learn that promotion, sponsored training, and the reception of gifts and free samples is an acceptable norm in their future profession.<sup>7,8</sup>

In some countries, it is reported that the pharmaceutical industry directly finances continuing medical education.<sup>2</sup> No such data was found for Switzerland.

## Effects on health of patients

A systematic review published in the JAMA (The Journal of the American Medical Association) examined interactions between physicians and the pharmaceutical industry, and the effects it had on drug prescription. It was shown that, despite receiving gifts which frequently included financial incentives, physicians believed their ability to prescribe the best drugs for their patient was not influenced. However, it was shown that more exposure to talks by sales representatives was associated with less ability to recognise inaccurate claims about medicine and increased prescribing costs<sup>2</sup>.

## Media output in Switzerland

The lack of official research on the topic has led to the mainstream media conducting their own “research”, with Blick citing a swimsa policy paper in a 2019 article<sup>9</sup>. The article implies that, while swimsa officially states that medical students have to be informed about the effects of the promotion of the pharmaceutical industry, we receive money from the VSAO, which in effect is allegedly sponsored by the pharmaceutical industry. The article is part of a research conducted by Blick, Beobachter and Handelszeitung, which aims to disclose the actual influence of the pharmaceutical industry on healthcare professionals<sup>10</sup>. This additionally underlines the need for official research and a neutral platform of doing so, free of the want for “sensational news”.

As future healthcare professionals, we also urge the pharmaceutical industry, as well as governmental and local authorities to promote research and action regarding the environmental impact of the pharmaceutical industry - research about this topic has been largely neglected, but it is more and more apparent that measures need to be taken in order to preserve and improve the health of our current and future patients. For example, antibiotics are often found as contaminants in waters, having an impact on the prevalence of antibiotic-resistant bacteria ([source1](#), [source2](#)). swimsa supports the One Health approach, which highlights the interconnection between different health sectors, such as veterinary and human medicine. This is relevant because some pharmaceutical products are also used for livestock, impacting the environment and the health of people. (and a similar discourse could be had for phytosanitary products.)

In the Call to Action, we urge pharmaceutical companies to invest in Research & Development which includes the full cycle of life of their products, from phase 0 trials to their safe disposal, and also to improve their ecological impact. We also ask for more information to be made available to patients and healthcare professionals about the environmental impact of their products.<sup>11</sup>

## 4. References

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