

Educational initiatives for medical and pharmacy students about drug promotion: an international cross-sectional survey

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This survey report is the first outcome of the project. The second outcome will be a practical guide for medical and pharmacy students on understanding and responding to pharmaceutical promotion. The guide will be tested by students in 2006. WHO and HAI intend to publish and distribute the manual to all medical and pharmacy schools worldwide in mid-2007.

Executive summary

Introduction

Increasing attention is being paid to the relationship between health professionals and the pharmaceutical industry. Education of medical and pharmacy students has a crucial role to play in preparing future practitioners to respond appropriately to drug promotion. This is the first international survey to examine the extent to which medical and pharmacy students are being educated about drug promotion.

Methods

A global list of pharmacy and medical schools was developed based on relevant Internet sites as well as information supplied by the World Health Organization (WHO). Deans of these institutions were contacted from July to December 2004 to ask whether or not the institutions were educating students about drug promotion (e.g. critical evaluation and responses to promotion); if so, contact information for educators was requested. Additionally, notices were placed on e-mail listserves with a focus on pharmaceutical policy or drug promotion.

A more detailed questionnaire was sent to educators between January and April 2005. The questionnaire covered the following issues: amount of time spent on this type of education, placement in the curriculum, types of promotional activities, regulatory and ethical issues covered, educational techniques, materials developed, evaluation, judgment of success and identification of barriers to success. English, French and Spanish versions of the questionnaire were produced. Non-respondents received up to two follow-up questionnaires at 10-day intervals. Replies were included if they reported educating medical or pharmacy students about responses to any aspect of drug promotion. Those only reporting education about how to promote products, for example training for sales representatives, were excluded. The analysis of results is descriptive. Responses were classified by health profession (pharmacy or medicine) and by location within a WHO region. Exploratory chi square analysis was carried out to identify potential differences between pharmacy and medical faculty responses, using EpiInfo 2000. These differences should be interpreted as generating hypotheses for further study.

Results

The initial faxed survey reached 1014 medical and pharmacy faculties in 110 countries. We received 710 contact names in 91 countries from the initial faxed query and e-mail listserve postings. Of these, 564 were individuals involved in education on drug promotion. We sent a detailed questionnaire to all of them. Two hundred and sixty two (46%) responded, of whom 34 (13%) were excluded (duplicates or not teaching about drug promotion). Results are based on 228 respondents from 64 countries, 91 from pharmacy schools and 137 from medical schools. Responses were classified by WHO region. There were 92 respondents from Europe,

56 from the Americas, 31 from the Western Pacific, 20 each from Africa and South-East Asia, and 9 from the Eastern Mediterranean.

Nearly three-quarters of respondents, 165 (72%), reported that education about drug promotion is part of the required curriculum at their institution, and over half reported more than one type of course on promotion. However, nearly one-third of medical and one-fifth of pharmacy respondents reported only 1-2 hours of education on promotion within the required curriculum. Total reported educational time, in all types of courses, was significantly greater at pharmacy than medical schools: 50 (55%) reported more than 10 hours of education on promotion in total, as compared with 39 (28%) of medical faculty respondents.

Over half the respondents were educating students on one or more of the following issues: advertisements, sales representatives, sponsored conferences and seminars, promotional 'research', gifts and industry funded journals. More pharmacy than medical respondents covered promotion on the Internet (59% vs. 29%) and patient requests for advertised medicines (50% vs. 33%).

Three-quarters of respondents, 170 (75%) covered the regulation and/or ethics of drug promotion, with the highest proportion of these reporting that they discussed national government regulation of promotion, followed by professional codes, and the ethics of interactions with the industry.

The most commonly reported educational technique was lectures, 192 (84% overall), followed by small group discussions in tutorials and workshops (65%). Those who allocated one-half day or less to education on drug promotion were highly likely to list lectures as the only type of educational technique used. Most of those spending 10 hours or more used small group discussions as well as lectures, and more than half also carried out critical analyses of sample advertisements.

The involvement of sales representatives in education can help students to better understand the types of promotional techniques used and to respond appropriately. Only 15% of respondents involved sales representatives, more often pharmacists than physicians: 20% vs. 12%.

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