

Blurring the Boundaries: Incentives for Drug Sellers

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In 1995 Parke-Davis, a US company, promoted its cough and cold remedy Sinutab with the promise to pharmacists of a complimentary bottle of red wine to celebrate father's day if they sold three boxes of Sinutab Maximum Strength or Sinutab Non-Drowsy.⁽¹⁴⁷⁾ They are described as "irrational combinations of old drugs," and Sinutab Maximum Strength, which contains an antihistamine, should not be used in combination with alcohol, particularly when driving or operating machinery.⁽¹⁴⁸⁾

A 1996 advertisement promised pharmacists and drug sellers in Peru the chance to win expensive prizes such as a colour television set, a refrigerator, or a number of other "gifts" if they sell enough products sold by three companies. In Peru, as in most developing countries, prescription-only regulations are not enforced. Someone who is ill with the flu or diarrhoea often goes to a pharmacy directly and buys a medicine. If the pharmacist or drug seller wins prizes for selling more antibiotics, does it matter that flu and most diarrhoea are of viral origin and antibiotics are useless in treating them? If oral rehydration salts, which prevent dehydration in acute diarrhoea, are not on the list of medicines linked to the raffle, will they be recommended as readily as anti-diarrhoeal drugs?

In a similar advertising campaign in Mexico in 1997, pharmacists were offered the possibility of winning prizes such as all-expense paid Caribbean cruises, video cassettes, microwave ovens, televisions, etc, if they ordered a weight-reducing product, Fattaché (glucosamine and dietary fibres).⁽¹⁴⁹⁾

With similar disregard for health priorities pharmacists in the US are offered rebates and discounts if they sell more of a specific drug. Under its Performance Rx scheme, PCS, owned by Eli Lilly, pays pharmacists bonuses of up to US\$12 a prescription to recommend drugs on a special "performance drug list" of 89 out of the 800 drugs on the PCS formulary. This contrasts to normal profits for pharmacists of about 50 cents a prescription.⁽¹⁵⁰⁾

Chapter References

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