

For Advisability of Requiring Disclosure of Free Samples of Prescribed Products given to Vermont Health Care Providers

Testimony of Sarah LeLeiko Cutrona, MD, MPH

Assistant Professor of Medicine, University of Massachusetts Medical School

Good morning. I am a board certified General Internist and I have published work in peer-reviewed medical journals on the use of free prescription drug samples in adults and children. Free drug samples are used by the pharmaceutical industry to market new and expensive medications. They are not a gift to patients in need.

My review of the medical literature has shown that free drug samples pose several important risks. A free sample closet is just what it sounds like: a closet full of drugs. Individual office policies on who accesses these drugs, how distribution is documented and how the inventory is monitored can vary widely. For example, a published study of 18 family practice offices in Nebraska found only one sample closet locked, some closets were accessible to physicians alone, some to nursing staff, some to general office staff and one office had a drug closet that patients could access without supervision.

Documentation of quantity, type, and lot number of distributed samples also varied widely, a potential safety problem in the case of a drug recall. Monitoring of inventory can be disorganized. Samples may be kept on the shelves past the expiration date or may even be distributed after the date of a recall.

Labeling is another safety concern for free samples. A published study of highly used drug samples found that enclosures with detailed dosing information were frequently absent and that labeling on pediatric dosing, drug interactions, adverse effects and use in pregnancy and lactation were often deficient.

Free sample distribution bypasses the pharmacist. A pharmacist can perform important checks on the drug prescribing process, catching allergy or drug interaction information that may be overlooked by a physician. In addition, pharmacists may be more up to date on the latest information on drug warnings and label changes. Samples tend to be newer medications with less time in circulation and may in fact be medications with greater risk of new warnings.

Free samples have been shown in multiple studies to affect provider prescribing habits, increasing brand name prescriptions and increasing overall drug costs.

Some physicians and office staff consider free drug samples to be a direct gift from pharmaceutical representatives. A retail value of approximately \$10,000 in free samples was used by physicians and office staff from a single practice in a single year, as documented in an article by Westfall et al. The authors of this study observed that doctor's personal use of free samples also insulates them from the true cost of medications and may contribute to rising drug costs.