

## Pharmacists paid by drug company for patient details

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ONE of the world's biggest drug companies has been accused of paying Australian pharmacists to promote some of its best-selling drugs, in a controversial deal that has divided the profession.

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Pfizer pays pharmacies a \$7 "administration fee" for each patient signed up to so-called support programs that involve the drug company providing information directly to patients about nine of its drugs.

Pharmacists say the deal, which Pfizer struck with the Pharmacy Guild of Australia in July, is similar to the one dumped this month for them to market dietary supplements with prescription medicines.

The pharmacists' union said it was another example of the owners' guild using the good name of pharmacists to boost its profits. The union called on the guild to abandon the deal.

The chief executive of the Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers, Australia, Chris Walton, said: "Just like the failed Blackmores deal, this uses a computer system to try to bypass the advice from a professional pharmacist.

"Instead of delivering better patient outcomes, this just aims to stuff more money into the pharmacy guild."

Pfizer receives patient information, including mobile phone numbers and email addresses, as part of the scheme, under which it provides regular information to patients about their condition and medication.

Like the Blackmores deal, when one of nine Pfizer drugs is being dispensed, the guild's computer system prompts pharmacists that patients are eligible for a support program.

One of the drugs included in the scheme is Pfizer's cholesterol-lowering blockbuster Lipitor, for which more than 10 million prescriptions were filled last year through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme at a cost to the taxpayer of almost \$600 million.

Pfizer will face competition from cheaper generic versions of the drug when its patent expires early next year.

Patients who sign up for the 12-week support program linked to Lipitor receive a cookbook and weekly emails containing health advice. Other Pfizer drugs with associated support programs are Champix, Xalatan, Viagra, Lyrica, Pristiq, Aricept, Celebrex and Effexor XR.

A pharmacist who did not wish to be named said: "Pharmacists might get a short-term gain of \$7 but they are putting patient information into the hands of a drug manufacturer who is obviously going to promote their products directly to that patient.

"It's a back-door way of promoting and advertising."

The pharmacist said the Pfizer deal was similar to that struck with Blackmores, which he said had done enormous damage to the reputation of pharmacists.

"In my mind now, if I want to recommend a product, I wonder if the consumer is thinking that I am just giving them the product to make money," he said.

"The guild often speaks as the voice of pharmacy but it's becoming pretty clear that they are just out for commercial ventures and not the interests of patients."

A spokesman for the pharmacy guild said patients needed to provide written consent before being enrolled in the support programs and were made aware that their information would be provided to Pfizer.

He said the guild was "confident of the completely ethical nature" of the programs.

A Pfizer spokeswoman said the programs were designed to benefit patients rather than achieve commercial objectives.

"Under no circumstances does Pfizer market its medicines directly to patients," she said.

*This story was found at: <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/national/pharmacists-paid-by-drug-company-for-patient-details-20111018-Ilypd.html>*