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Doctors have unhealthy desire for gifts

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MEDICAL specialists actively ask for gifts from companies worth between \$50 and \$100,000, the biggest investigation into the practice has found.

The requests extend to money for the salaries of nurses, donations to their departments, computers, microwaves, journals, textbooks, CDs and even funds for a Christmas party.

The University of NSW study asked 823 specialists nationwide what companies gave them and what they asked for. It found that almost all the specialists were offered food and gifts for their office, and one in two received personal gifts - including harbour cruises and tickets to the opera - as well as money for conference travel. Fifteen per cent asked drug companies for gifts, money and travel.

"Doctors are sometimes seen as the innocent victims, and the villains in the piece are the pharmaceutical industry," the lead author, associate professor of ethics and law in medicine, Paul McNeill, said. "In reality it is a two-way relationship."

The survey, published online in the *Internal Medicine Journal* today, follows recent comments from the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission head, Graeme Samuel, that "these grubby issues" acted "as an unpleasant stain on the professionalism and good name of Australia's medical practitioners".

The study found six specialists asked for money for the salaries of nurses, one being \$80,000, and another asked for a \$60,000 donation to their department "in return for time seeing [drug company] reps".

Each year drug companies spend millions trying to convince specialists - such as experts in cancer, respiratory and heart disease - to prescribe their pills. The stakes are high because a recommendation from a specialist can add an expensive drug to a hospital pharmacy list and make the drug company handsome profits.

The study found that personal gifts offered to doctors were valued up to \$40,000 and included wine, flowers, a "spa" dinner, harbour cruises, tickets to the movies, the circus, concerts, opera and sporting events. Tickets to non-educational events are banned under the ethical code of Medicines Australia, the pharmaceutical industry's peak body.

Professor McNeill said these types of gifts, although much less common than free travel and food, could be an indication of something more widespread.

Of the one-in-two specialists offered travel to conferences, two-thirds accepted and most attended the meetings as audience members, not speakers.

The authors - who included ethics and medical professors from the University of Sydney and the University of Newcastle - recommended in their report the end of direct payments from drug companies for travel. Industry funds for travel should be distributed through an independent group, the report said.

The Royal Australasian College of Physicians recently updated its voluntary guidelines, suggesting

that doctors "carefully consider" travel offers to attend conferences.

A Medicines Australia spokesman said the study was done before a 2003 improvement to its code. "Medicines Australia and the pharmaceutical industry welcomes any scrutiny of the relationship between companies and health care professionals," he said.

Professor McNeill said doctors are uneasy with the situation and wanted to discuss the issue.

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