

Others Reap the Profits

At last, cooler weather has arrived. I do not think we will see frost on the pumpkin here in the Valley this month, but the drop in day and nighttime temperatures is always welcomed.

I used to love Halloween. Dress up in a costume, ring a neighbor's doorbell, and get free candy. I still believe it is one of best deals around. Our kids had it even better- scrubs from the hospital, surgical mask, booties and the stethoscope and voila! – An instant doctor costume. Those were the days...

After reading the op-ed pages of the nation's leading newspapers recently, I feel that the pharmaceutical industry is in a constant state of trick or treating, as it collects billions of dollars in profit from the promotion of drugs/vaccines that may not necessarily have proven their efficacy.

The *New York Times* recently reported an event that occurred in 2002, when the FDA approved a new type of a cholesterol lowering drug based upon the results of a few clinical trials that treated less than 4,000 patients. The trials offered no evidence that the drugs had reduced heart attacks or the risk of cardiovascular disease. Fast forward to 2008. Sales of this medicine reached \$5.2 billion last year. Physicians have heavily prescribed the drug, as a stand alone product, Zetia, or as a combination medicine called Vytorin. Recent data suggests that patients who take the drug may be at an increased risk for developing cancer. Needless to say, sales of the drug have plummeted 40% this year. The marketing for a vaccine to prevent HPV infection was even more persuasive. The pharmaceutical industry lobbied every possible group to create a sense of panic and demand for its product. Here in the United States, where the disease is preventable through annual PAP smears that detects the precancerous cells early enough for effective treatment. Unfortunately, the drug is too expensive to be sold in developing world countries where the disease is epidemic. Again, a common theme for the pharmaceutical companies is apparent – extreme profit.

As physicians I believe that we have the responsibility to objectively analyze the available scientific data before we prescribe a newer, usually more expensive medication. We must be sure that the product is the best medication for our patients, and not the best profit maker for the pharmaceutical industry. After all, we are the ones who write the prescriptions.

The topic of the electronic medical record is never far from our minds as we are constantly lobbied by the software giants. The *Wall Street Journal* has reported that less than 14% of physicians utilize the electronic medical record (EMR). The costs associated with digitizing paper based records and retraining doctors and office staff to use a new system usually costs far more than any doctor's office or hospital will save over the short to medium term. An article in the Times reported that doctors garner only 11% of the savings from use of EMR, with the majority of the cost benefits going to the insurers.

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Surprised, I think not. The doctors bear the costs, others reap the profits. I am not opposed to new technology, but I believe it must be introduced properly.

I have watched physicians' faces buried in their laptops as they furiously input their patients responses. As physicians we have been taught to listen to our patients, process the information we receive, both verbal and nonverbal as we discuss their symptoms with them. No one can argue the legibility of the final product, but how much really pertinent information is lost in the process?

In closing, in less than one month a new President and Vice-President will be elected. I wish all of the candidates well. May the best man and woman win!

We welcome your comments. Please send them to edonahue@mcmsonline.com.

Warm regards,

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President