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Health Alliance Recommendation to Area Health Care Professionals: Put Effective, Affordable Care Ahead of Drug Company Influence

Open Door Policies for Free Samples and Drug Sales Reps Should Be Altered

SEATTLE, May 30, 2006 – The Puget Sound Health Alliance Board of Directors announced the unanimous adoption of two position statements intended to improve health care effectiveness and affordability by encouraging clinics and hospitals to limit the influence of drug company sales and marketing. The recommendations are consistent with policies that have already been adopted by a number of clinics and medical centers in the Puget Sound region.

First, the Puget Sound Health Alliance recommends that area physician clinics, hospitals and other providers limit or eliminate open door policies for pharmaceutical sales reps to visit with doctors. Second, the Health Alliance recommends that doctors and other health care providers eliminate the distribution of free drug samples.

“The appropriate use of prescription drugs, whether brand-name or generic, saves lives and improves the health of countless numbers of patients,” said Margaret Stanley, executive director of the Puget Sound Health Alliance. “The Alliance encourages everyone to recognize pharmaceutical sales rep visits, free samples and other marketing items for what they are – efforts to increase the sale of specific drugs.”

Dr. Ralph Rossi, president of The Polyclinic said, “The pharmaceutical industry spends billions marketing directly to physicians to boost sales of brand name drugs over other medications that can be just as effective at a lower cost. We encourage doctors to get the latest information about effectiveness of brand name and generic drugs from unbiased sources with no vested interest in treatment decisions other than good health outcomes.”

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The two positions were suggested by local physician leaders and other health experts on two Alliance committees, and were supported by the Health Alliance's Consumer Advisory Group.

“By implementing a ‘no advertising zone’, doctors can help to ensure that medications are prescribed based on information about the full range of drugs available on the market rather than on information and promotional tactics focused on selling a specific drug,” said Dan Lessler, Associate Professor at Harborview Medical Center who is also a member of the Health Alliance's Quality Improvement Committee involved in developing the positions.

Sue Pritchard, director of Employment Services for Easter Seals Washington, expressed her appreciation for the Alliance's work on this issue. “The high cost of prescription drugs, especially for the low-income people we serve, is a definite concern,” said Pritchard.

As a community-based non-profit, the Health Alliance can encourage the adoption of policies, but has no enforcement authority. "The decision about which policies to adopt rests with each physician clinic or facility," said Dr. Peter Dunbar, president of the Washington State Medical Association (WSMA). "The WSMA is committed to working with the Alliance to increase awareness about the impact of pharmaceutical sales efforts and sampling programs, and we will be educating physicians on these position statements."

In addition to seeking out unbiased sources for comprehensive information, clinics are being encouraged to cease the distribution of free drug samples to improve the safety and quality of patient care, while reducing health care costs in several important ways:

- **Better tracking of medications**— Giving out samples during an office visit does not allow for the same systematic documentation and tracking of medications as when a prescription is written then filled at a pharmacy. Some doctors note the sample and batch number in a patient's chart, but many do not. Without proper documentation, identifying drug interactions over time or knowing which patients to contact in the event of a drug recall becomes very difficult.

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- **Helping patients afford the drugs they need**—Starting a patient on a drug sample can lead to filling a prescription for that drug, but risks the patient choosing to stop taking the medicine because it is too expensive. By prescribing equally effective medications, including generics when available, from the beginning, physicians can help patients adhere to their medication therapy.
- **Maintaining safety checks**— Often when a patient fills a prescription, the pharmacist provides information about side effects and possible interaction with other medications. Distributing drug samples circumvents this process, removing a beneficial safety-check.
- **A better strategy for low-income patients**— Drug samples are not meant to treat patients over time, because available samples change as new drugs are promoted. When a sample is no longer available, the patient is forced to switch to another type of sample, find a way to pay for the drug through a prescription, or stop taking medication. The Alliance supports expansion and use of existing programs that help low-income patients access free and low-cost prescription drugs. *(See Alliance website for links to such resources.)*

The recommended approach for limiting the influence of pharmaceutical company marketing was developed based on the Alliance’s interest in drawing from best practices in the region. Many local health care organizations have already successfully implemented policies along these lines, including The Everett Clinic, Group Health, Harborview, Harrison Hospital, The Polyclinic, Swedish Medical Center, University of Washington Medical Center, and Virginia Mason Medical Center.

The Puget Sound Health Alliance is a non-profit made up of those who provide, pay for and use health care, working together to improve quality of care at a price more people can afford. More than 100 organizations have joined the Alliance, including Boeing, Starbucks, Puget Sound Energy, REI, Washington Mutual, WA State Health Care Authority, King County and many other employers, physician clinics, hospitals, consumer groups, unions and trusts, health plans, pharmaceutical companies, and other health organizations. For more information, visit www.pugetsoundhealthalliance.org.

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