



Position Statement on
Use of Pharmaceutical Samples in Practice Locations

Unanimously Adopted by the Health Alliance Board of Directors, May 30, 2006

The Puget Sound Health Alliance strongly recommends that doctors and other providers and clinics or physician groups not accept or distribute pharmaceutical samples in their practices.

Supporting Statement:

Typically, pharmaceutical samples are distributed to patients directly by doctors and other providers during an office visit, rather than through a structured dispensing process at a pharmacy. Handing out samples of medications reduces the overall quality of care by sidestepping the systematic documentation and tracking of medications being taken by each patient and the related safety checks (e.g., to protect against drug interactions, follow-up in the event of a drug recall, etc) that take place when a prescription is filled at a pharmacy. The medication management process involving discussion between a pharmacist and the patient often includes education about side effects and possible interaction with other medications taken by the patient, in addition to electronic documentation that may become critical, for example, in the event of a drug recall.

Doctors are trusted to prescribe drugs based on the best treatment for each patient. The availability of samples can put doctors and other providers in a difficult position where they may be inclined to provide a sample drug that would not be the first choice for a given patient, simply because the sample is immediately available and free. From a patient perspective, the distribution of drug samples may give patients the impression that the doctor thinks the type of drug in the sample is the best medication to take. When patients must later fill prescriptions, many do not want to switch drugs. This can create an adversarial relationship with the insurer who may give a financial incentive to switch to an equally-effective lower-cost generic drug. Too often patients see it instead as a penalty due to the higher co-payment or lack of coverage for the drug that the doctor originally gave them in sample form.

In clinics and other practice settings which serve low-income patients for whom the cost of pharmaceuticals is a barrier, the practice of distributing samples is a short-term approach that risks lower quality care. In addition to the lack of safety checks, the supply of a particular drug in sample form is not endless, so it is not possible to provide consistent care using samples when treating patients over time because the type of drugs in sample form changes as new drugs are being promoted. When a particular drug is no longer available in sample form, the treatment must end or the patient must make the choice of switching to another drug available as a sample or purchasing the drug they were on. Instead, the Alliance encourages the use of alternative ways to expand access to affordable prescriptions without affecting patient safety protections, through pharmaceutical company, foundation, government agency and community-based programs that provide free or reduced-price medications prescribed by a physician and dispensed through a pharmacy.

The Puget Sound Health Alliance is committed to supporting the highest quality in medical practice. Therefore, it is the position of the Puget Sound Health Alliance that physicians and physician groups not utilize pharmaceutical samples in their practices.