

# 'Drug cos use health camps to push sales'

TIMES NEW NETWORK

Marketing personnel from pharmaceutical firms are screening people and conducting various diagnostic tests at 'free health camps' in return for prescriptions from doctors for their company's medicines, a report in the British Medical Journal (BMJ) has revealed.

The Medical Council of India (MCI) says the practice is unauthorised and that only a registered medical practitioner can perform screening and diagnostic tests. The report, published on Wednesday, says it has evidence that unlicensed employees from several pharmaceutical companies, both Indian and multinational, including Abbott, Bayer, GlaxoSmithKline, Roche and Sanofi have tested patients at health camps.

According to the article, along with 'free health camps' held near slums or temples or even middle-class colonies, where doctors participate in the name of doing "a little bit of charity", such testing is being done even in doctors' clinics. In these camps, it was found that the medicines prescribed belonged to the company whose representatives were conducting the tests.

Many such company sales representatives told the BMJ that such camps helped them achieve their sales targets. The article said several insiders confirmed, how one positive test result was usually enough to trigger a prescription.

"Even if screening for diabetes is done properly, up to half the tests that initially come up positive can be false alarms. So some people may end up taking drugs for a disease that they don't have, risking side effects without benefit," explained Dr Panjak Shah, a diabetes

## A win-win strategy

Every business division of Abbott India organises health camps. In December 2012, Abbott India won a "certificate of marketing excellence" for revitalising India's "thyroid market", it boasts on its website. Their flagship product Thyronorm had outpaced other brands despite being the priciest. It is among the top drugs in India, grossing almost \$3.5 million a month, according to an IMS Health research. "I would call it market penetration with a label of corporate social responsibility," said Hans Hogerzeil, a professor of global health at Netherland's Groningen University who has also worked with the WHO. Last year, India made corporate social responsibility mandatory for large companies. Abbott decided that screening and health camps would be among its core social responsibility efforts. TNN

specialist who worked at AIIMS, Delhi.

K L Sharma, joint secretary in the health ministry, is quoted as saying that "it is totally unethical" for doctors to prescribe specific products in return for testing services from a drug company and it also violates MCI regulations.

Incidentally, many of these companies claim to have a stringent code of business conduct that they strictly adhere to and are also members of the International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers and Associations which has a code of practice in place since 1981. At the beginning of 2015, all drug companies doing business in India, claimed that a voluntary code of practice for ethical marketing of their products, the Uniform Code of Pharmaceutical Marketing Practices, was in force.

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