

## Cooperation between Physicians and Pharmaceutical Industry: Qualitative Study of the Opinions of Physicians

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**Introduction.** Different studies worldwide show that cooperation between pharmaceutical industry and physicians, e.g. honoraria for lectures, free drug samples, medicines' information, continuing medical education (CME), may create conflicts of interests; however, physicians are often found to possess the belief that they are immune to the impact of the pharmaceutical promotion.

**Aim.** The current study aims to explore opinions of the physicians in Latvia regarding cooperation with the pharmaceutical industry.

**Material and Methods.** This study, exploring the opinions of 25 physicians from different specialties, is a part of a larger study elaborated on the basis of the methodological guidelines that were provided by the Health Action International (HAI) and the Medicines Transparency Alliance (MeTA) [HAI; MeTA, 2010]. The current study encloses semi-structured face-to-face interviews with physicians from different specialties. The informants were selected using the maximum variation sampling method. The theoretical coding approach [Flick, 1998], grouping concepts into codes and categories was implemented, using the qualitative data analysis program *Atlas.ti*.

**Results.** The informants are inclined to think that in the current economic situation cooperation with pharmaceutical industry is mostly beneficial in many areas of cooperation, and sometimes even crucial. Most of the informants also raise concern that transparency and disclosure of financial interactions would negatively influence a physician's public image and also limit possibilities of obtaining financial support for CME. The study also reveals the traits of both the balanced and the general reciprocity [Sahlins, 1972]. Interactions with the industry are often social context-bound, and general reciprocity manifests itself when closer social ties are established between physicians and pharmaceutical representatives. The traits of balanced reciprocity are revealed in direct exchange of certain benefits for both parties. The study allowed to define three groups of opinions regarding the influence of cooperation on prescribing. The first group generally denies any influence, referring to their academic status, critical thinking capabilities or rigorous regulation systems. "The illusion of unique invulnerability" characterizes the second group of opinions, and the third group acknowledges that the cooperation has an impact on prescribing habits in Latvia and also worldwide.

**Conclusions.** There is a widespread belief that the cooperation with the pharmaceutical industry helps maintain proper development of medicine in Latvia; therefore, in the current situation it would be unlikely possible to eliminate it. Although many informants were sceptic towards disclosure of all financial ties, a concern that the cooperation may create conflicts of interests was revealed by the study. It means that strong regulatory policies, providing for transparency of all monetary transactions between physicians and the pharmaceutical sector, and also educational tools helping physicians recognize and deal with pharmaceutical promotion are essential in Latvia.