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ARTICLE

Principles of educational outreach ('academic detailing') to improve clinical decision making

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With the efficacy and costs of medications rising rapidly, it is increasingly important to ensure that drugs be prescribed as rationally as possible. Yet, physicians' choices of drugs frequently fall short of the ideal of precise and cost-effective decision making. Evidence indicates that such decisions can be improved in a variety of ways. A number of theories and principles of communication and behavior changes can be found that underlie the success of pharmaceutical manufacturers in influencing prescribing practices. Based on this behavioral science and several field trials, it is possible to define the theory and practice of methods to improve physicians' clinical decision making to enhance the quality and cost-effectiveness of care. Some of the most important techniques of such "academic detailing" include (1) conducting interviews to investigate baseline knowledge and motivations for current prescribing patterns, (2) focusing programs on specific categories of physicians as well as on their opinion leaders, (3) defining clear educational and behavioral objectives, (4) establishing credibility through a respected organizational identity, referencing authoritative and unbiased sources of information, and presenting both sides of controversial issues, (5) stimulating active physician participation in educational interactions, (6) using concise graphic educational materials, (7) highlighting and repeating the essential messages, and (8) providing positive reinforcement of improved practices in follow-up visits. Used by the nonprofit sector, the above techniques have been shown to reduce inappropriate prescribing as well as unnecessary health care expenditures.

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