

Sales reps in India push unnecessary antibiotics

Representatives of Sun Pharma and Abbott have given gifts to quack doctors, encouraging them to prescribe their antibiotics. Madlen Davies, Rahul Meesaraganda, and Ben Stockton report.



A queue has formed outside Dr Chullan's* clinic in a slum area of Delhi before he opens for the afternoon. The small room is baking hot and loud with the sounds of motorbike horns and shouts of men pushing carts of fly-covered fruit outside. Chullan examines a range of patients: a young woman with a cold, children with diarrhoea, and an older woman with toothache. He prescribes antibiotics for these ailments: amoxicillin, ciprofloxacin, co-trimoxazole, and norfloxacin, and gives three to four tablets each time, along with Ayurvedic medicine, which he believes cure these ailments in the long-term. Chullan has a degree in Ayurveda but no recognised qualification in allopathic medicine, which means he is prescribing antibiotics illegally. He is one of an estimated 2.5 million so-called quack doctors in India providing health care in mainly poor and rural areas.

An investigation by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism has shown that two of India's biggest drug companies, Abbott and Sun Pharma, are alleged to be giving inducements such as gifts and cash to quacks like Chullan to encourage them to prescribe vast amounts of antibiotics. These practices are occurring despite global efforts to curb inappropriate use of these drugs to stem rising rates of antimicrobial resistance (AMR). Spokespeople for both companies said that their policies prohibited the offering of gifts to health-care providers to encourage prescriptions.

A Sun Pharma salesman told an undercover Bureau reporter that some quacks and allopathic doctors in India were given gifts to encourage them to favour Sun products over those of competitors. These included fridges, televisions, travel, gift cards, cash, and

equipment like ECG machines, blood pressure cuffs, or weighing machines. He also said sales representatives would offer extra pills or money as an incentive to buy more antibiotics, encouraging potentially irrational prescription. Sun Pharma is the largest drug manufacturer in India, with more than £3 billion revenue in 2018, and its products are used by the NHS in the UK.

“the point is not about whether they work or not. The point is: where is the market?”

The NHS also buys devices from Abbott Laboratories, a US company that had more than £24 billion in revenue last year. Its Indian subsidiary, Abbott India, is the second biggest pharmaceutical business in the country. An Abbott salesman in India suggested that he knew antibiotics might be misused, but his main concern was targeting the best market, not efficacy.

He said that the company also offered buy-five-get-one-free deals on boxes of antibiotics, encouraging bulk buying and consequently more prescriptions, “whether necessary or unnecessary”. The Abbott salesman also alleged that the company incentivises some allopathic doctors with cocktail soirees in five star hotels, and parties for their families.

Experts condemned the pharmaceutical companies for allegedly incentivising irrational prescribing of antibiotics. Jayasree Iyer, executive director of the The Access to Medicine Foundation, said: “If we know that AMR is caused by, among many reasons, overuse and potentially overselling as a result of aggressive marketing, and companies have acknowledged that, then we do expect

to see strong policies and strong enforcements. With these in place we would see fewer and fewer and one day zero incidences”.

The foundation runs the AMR Benchmark Index, which measures whether pharmaceutical companies are introducing policies known to combat AMR. She added that some companies are already looking at how to make sure staff are compliant with the company's global policies, including looking at how they hire, train, and discipline staff.

Kailash Tandale, from the Maharashtra Pharmacist's Association said: “There should not be direct sale of antibiotics to these people... They don't study pharmacology, still they prescribe antibiotics. Higher antibiotics, or two antibiotics at a time. Irrational prescriptions are written by these, that is the issue”.

Ramanan Laxminarayan, director of the Centre for Disease Dynamics, Economics and Policy (CDDEP), said that quacks vastly outnumber government doctors in India so it would be no surprise they were being targeted by drug companies. He said: “There is a need to balance access to antibiotics, which these practitioners provide, and also prevent overuse and inappropriate use and therein lies the challenge”.

India is facing rising resistance. A 2016 study from three public hospitals in Delhi found “alarming” rates of AMR among pathogens causing neonatal sepsis, leading to higher mortality rates. 82% of acinetobacter and 54% of klebsiella isolates were multidrug resistant. Doctors in other hospitals warn that they regularly see patients with so-called pan-resistant infections.

In theory, India offers free health care to its citizens, but a recent report from the CDDEP found a shortfall

Published Online
August 19, 2019
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099\(19\)30444-X](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099(19)30444-X)

*Name changed to protect anonymity

For the 2016 study on antimicrobial resistance in sepsis in India see [Articles](#) *Lancet Glob Health* 2016; 4: e752–60



Madlen Davies/TBI

of 600 000 government doctors and 2 million nurses. For many of India's poorest people, quack doctors provide often life-saving care. More than 5.7 million people around the world die every year from antibiotic-treatable illnesses, with the bulk of these deaths in low-income and middle-income countries like India.

Sales representatives from Sun Pharma and Abbott who spoke to an undercover Bureau reporter made no secret of the incentives they had offered quacks and doctors alike.

Abbott has been criticised in the past over allegations of expensive gifts to doctors, so the company has introduced restrictions. Direct gifts to doctors and quacks are limited to 2000 rupees (£23). As a result, the salesman said that now they "shouldn't do it directly", but instead go through a third party. He said that gifts and free samples were still commonplace in other departments. "In certain specialties they are going all out to offer whatever is possible", he alleged.

The Abbott sales representative admitted that they promoted antibiotics based on how much profit they would make, rather than medical evidence. He said: "Now, the point is not about whether they work or not. The point is: where is the market? Where is the big market?...So it is not about the efficacy part, it is about how good I can grab the particular market and then penetrate into that market".

At Sun Pharma, sales representatives are asked to visit up to a dozen doctors—allopathic or quacks—every

day. Half of their 200 regular customers are quacks. It is not illegal for reps to visit quacks and promote items but it is illegal for any wholesaler or pharmacy to sell the products to them. The salesman described quacks as an "easy" market for antibiotics and their main target for sales. Allopathic doctors needed to be convinced of how safe and effective a drug is, whereas quacks often required no explanations, only incentives, he said. "You can give any damn thing", he said. "...They will accept it. And higher value is the input, higher value will be the output...It can be a TV. It can be a fridge. It can be any damn thing."

The aggressive marketing is in part down to their sales targets: Sun Pharma sales representatives earn bonuses if they sell more than 300 000 rupees (£3440) worth of antibiotics and painkillers every month. The Access to Medicine Foundation's 2018 benchmark showed only three of 18 companies (GlaxoSmithKline, Pfizer, and Shinogi), had completely de-linked their sales teams' bonuses from the volumes of antibiotics they sold.

A spokeswoman for Abbott said that it prohibits sales teams giving anything of value to doctors or pharmacists as incentives to sell its medicines and that the teams receive regular ethics and compliance training. She said sales staff "only meet with licensed health practitioners who are authorised to prescribe medicines".

Sun Pharma said it was "surprised and saddened to hear about the views shared by an alleged Sun Pharma sales representative". The company's spokesman added: "We can categorically say that this person's views in no way reflect Sun Pharma's values and the alleged activities are contrary to our company policies. At Sun Pharma, there is no room for unethical conduct or non-compliance with applicable laws, rules and regulations".

The company said that it did not allow gifts to health-care workers that were "intended to have an

inappropriate influence on [their] decision to prescribe, recommend, purchase, supply or administer products". It added that staff breaking this rule, or any law, would face disciplinary action or dismissal.

Meenakshi Gautham, a researcher from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine based in India, has interviewed quacks, also called informal providers, for more than a decade and concludes that they are being increasingly targeted by pharmaceutical companies who aggressively market antibiotics. "I have had pharmaceutical representatives tell me in some areas that if they have targets to sell 100 000 rupees [£1150] worth of antibiotics, 80 000 comes from selling to informal providers, and 20 000 from formal doctors", she said.

Her research shows that most quacks, as well as private allopathic doctors, get all their information about antibiotics from sales representatives and drug companies, rather than independent sources. Companies will host fully catered conferences for quacks with paid lectures from private doctors on which antibiotics to prescribe, she said. Her findings confirmed that it was the practice of some companies to offer quacks free samples of antibiotics. The quacks will often then give these to their poorest patients for free, as a misguided act of charity.

"There is a strong push coming from the pharmaceutical industry", Gautham said. "That push takes the form of very aggressive promotion of antibiotics, especially in rural markets, because these represent huge turnovers for those companies that manufacture and market antibiotics."

"Unless we work with the pharmaceutical industry to reduce the aggressive strategies, it's going to be difficult to work only with the providers [quacks] and get them to reduce their use."

Madlen Davies, Rahul Meesaraganda, Ben Stockton