

Reaction to the BMJ research paper:
Leem calls for confidence to be restored rather than suspicion fuelled

A research paper published this morning in the *British Medical Journal* and widely reported in the media suggests that French doctors who receive 'gifts' from pharmaceutical companies tend to make 'lower quality and more costly drug prescriptions'.

For pharmaceutical companies, the relationships they build with general practitioners take absolute priority. They have therefore paid extremely close attention to this research and the coverage it has attracted.

Pharmaceutical companies have expressed the strongest reservations regarding the conclusions drawn in this research paper, and would like to add a number of essential clarifications to aid its proper interpretation:

- The database accessible via the www.transparence.sante.gouv.fr website contains composite data originating in several business sectors, including the pharmaceutical industry, the medical devices industry and the cosmetics industry. The generic term 'benefits' covers invitations to scientific and training events and associated accommodation, travel and meal costs.... As a result, using and analysing this data is a particularly complex challenge. In 2016, the Conduct and Ethics Committee of the French Association of Pharmaceutical Companies (Codeem) brought forward proposals to improve the reliability of this database by revising its structure. These recommendations have yet to be acted upon.

A general practitioner invited to an orthopaedic conference by a medical devices company who subsequently fails to meet the generic prescription targets set by the French National Health Insurance (Assurance maladie) authority will, according to the methodology used in this research, be considered as having been exposed to and influenced by pharmaceutical companies.

It is useful to remember that 219,382 such benefits were provided by pharmaceutical companies to general practitioners in 2016. Of this total, only 306 exceeded €1,000 in value; an amount which puts the scope of these research findings into relative perspective.

- The research paper and those who have commented on its content have deliberately confused 'gifts', which have been prohibited by law since 1993, with 'benefits', which are permitted, albeit strictly regulated, by the same legislation and largely subject to recommendations issued by the relevant professional associations.
- The research found a correlation between the receipt of benefits by some general practitioners and their prescribing behaviour. As the authors of the study make clear, a causal relationship cannot be inferred from this correlation. Indeed, the data available do not under any circumstances make it possible to establish a direct relationship between the receipt of benefits from a company and the prescription of pharmaceuticals offered by the same company.
- The drug classes referred to in the research are very largely generic, and most are no longer promoted by pharmaceutical companies, especially during medical sales visits made by their representatives.

The number of medical sales representatives has halved over the last 10 years. Every aspect of medical sales visits is strictly regulated by the health authorities.

- The research paper and those who have commented on its content are generating confusion between the optimisation of treatment costs on the one hand, and the efficacy and even safety of prescription, and therefore the quality of care provided to the patient, on the other hand.

In conclusion, Leem strongly deplores this new vilification of an industry whose primary vocation is to provide patients with ever safer and more effective therapeutic solutions.

It highlights the fact that that the working relationships between doctors and pharmaceutical companies are essential for better patient care, and calls for an end to this kind of caricaturing. Leem regrets the simplistic and condescending impression of general practitioners put forward by some of those who have commented on this research paper.

It restates the fact that no other business sector is subject to such extensive transparency and compliance obligations as the pharmaceutical industry, and that legislation and regulation have been considerably tightened over the past 10 years.

Pharmaceutical companies have always and consistently supported this move to greater transparency; a fact that should restore confidence rather than fuel suspicion.

Press contacts:

Stéphanie Bou - Tel.: +33 (0)1 45 03 88 38 - e-mail: sbou@leem.org

Virginie Pautre – Tel.: +33 (0)1 45 03 88 87 - e-mail: vpautre@leem.org