LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Medicare Beneficiaries and Free Prescription Drug Samples: A National Survey

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To the Editor:—The recent article by Tjia et al. reports an association between cost-related nonadherence and accessing drug samples (OR 4.43, 95% CI 3.64–5.39).¹ This study, however, was not designed to answer the question of whether or not sample access reduces cost-related nonadherence, and the authors acknowledge caution in interpreting the direction of potential causality from their cross-sectional data. I remain concerned that while cost-related nonadherence may lead patients to request and receive samples more often, the samples do not solve the cost problem, and they may worsen it. The widespread perception among patients and physicians that samples are in fact “free” is not true. Drug samples represent the single largest marketing investment made by the pharmaceutical industry, accounting for 62% of their marketing expenditures.² Sample use has been associated with higher cost prescribing as well as inappropriate prescribing.^{3,4} When a written prescription follows a sample, it has been shown to match the sample 100% of the time.⁵ Since the time the data were collected for this study, low cost generic medications in multiple therapeutic classes have become increasingly available from a number of large national retail chains. I believe large prospective studies measuring clinical and economic outcomes are needed to assess the true impact

of drug sample use. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that samples likely continue to provide ample return on their investment for the pharmaceutical industry, as they remain the cornerstone of their marketing budget.

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