



Madras, Ore.

NO FREE LUNCH

COUNTRY DOCS SAY “THANKS,
BUT NO THANKS” TO PHARMA GIFTS
BY ELAINE VITONE

Last January in the 5,000-person high desert town of Madras, Ore., Dave Evans (MD '93), his wife, Suzanne El-Attar (MD '93), and their three partners at Madras Medical Group gathered around a trash can and pitched several hundred dollars worth of perfectly good medical and office supplies.

What did a bunch of tablets, cotton-swab holders, and pens ever do to them? Well, they couldn't be sure—and that's exactly why all of this stuff had to go. Out of concern for how pharmaceutical corporations' promotional gifts might be influencing their prescribing practices even at an unconscious level, this small office cleaned house of all pharma freebies for good. In July, Madras Medical and several other groups now engaged in a growing national movement were featured on the front page of *The New York Times*.

Evans and El-Attar believe that as much as doctors like to think they're not being

and they questioned the reliability of the information representatives were distributing, given the conflict of interests inherent in the doctor/drug-rep relationship. The drugs they were promoting were often so new that independent, peer-reviewed studies were not yet available for comparison.

Then Evans and El-Attar read an alarming study that polled general practitioners. The poll asked if they had prescribed a certain free drug sample to an uninsured hypertension patient who later became insured, would they continue prescribing the same medication, even if prescription costs were later covered in full? Sixty-nine percent said yes. Eighty-eight percent said that if the patient had been insured in the first place, they would have prescribed a different medication.

The last straw for Evans was in 2005, when he learned of the extent of a cover-up linked to a marquee drug.

Madras sits in a basin in the Cascade Mountains. Locals might farm alfalfa, wheat,

their efforts to stay current on therapeutic options. Evans feels that peer-reviewed publications like *The Medical Letter on Drugs and Therapeutics* are better alternatives. "They're very good, easy-to-use sources," he says.

Progressive issues like questioning pharmaceutical-company gifting have been important to Evans, El-Attar, and their friends from the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine ever since they were students. The husband-wife team were once active in the American Medical Student Association (AMSA), through which they advocated for healthcare reform in the early '90s. From 1993 to 1994, Evans was AMSA's national president, and El-Attar was legislative affairs director. Three years later, Evans' former roommate Andy Nowalk (MD/PhD '99, Res '03, Fel '05)—now assistant professor of pediatrics at Pitt—became president.

For years, Evans, El-Attar, Nowalk, and Laura Obbard (MD '96) have been discussing the need for a practicing physician's version of

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influenced, drug companies wouldn't spend \$5.5 billion on marketing each year—more than what all U.S. medical schools combined spend educating their students, according to a report in *The New England Journal of Medicine*—if the strategies didn't work.

Madras Medical's decision to go pharm-free didn't happen overnight.

A boom in the population of neighboring Bend, Ore., had made their office a popular stop for drug reps traveling between Bend and Portland in the past couple of years. With the boom, Madras staff began to experience the kind of visits that many doctors' offices throughout the country have come to expect: Complimentary lunches for the entire staff during which reps gave presentations on their products. On their way out, the reps left drug samples, marketing literature, pens, and other promotional items.

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and they might work in a nearby wood-product manufacturing plant or a lumber mill 14 miles up Route 26. Nearly 20 percent of the population lives below the poverty line.

"This is not a wealthy community by any stretch of the imagination," says Evans.

He and his partners are the only general practitioners in town. They believed that free drug samples, courtesy of pharmaceutical companies, were highly valued by their uninsured patients.

So the group explained the reasons behind the new policy to their patients before making it official on "Pharm Free Friday," an event the *Madras Pioneer* covered. To Evans' pleasant surprise, since the big spring cleaning, complaints have been "very, very few," even among those who had been maintained by the samples. In fact, most feedback has been of the what-took-you-so-long variety.

"I got a note from one of my patients that said, 'Thank you for taking a stand,'" Evans says.

Many physicians meet with drug reps in

AMSA—a national, multi-issue, multi-specialty, progressive activist organization. Two years ago at an annual meeting for AMSA alumni and current members, they made their dream a reality, founding the National Physicians Alliance (NPA). NPA advocates for such issues as affordable and equitable health care, safety-driven malpractice reform, and protecting Medicaid, in addition to resisting the influence of drug industry marketing.

Nowalk marvels at the promise of what began at that first gathering.

"There were probably only about 30 or 40 people in the room," says Evans, noting that a lot of them wrote checks to support the new organization.

Mitu (Suresh) Agarwal (MD '95) and Colleen Bush (MD '93) were among those who helped get NPA off the ground.

"Pitt was very encouraging of me developing some leadership skills," says Evans, "and I chose to do that through AMSA. ... Now that we're 10, 15 years out of medical school and more established in our practices and our lives, we decided that now's the time to do this." ■