

## Ban on drug samples urged

by [Peter Neurath](#), Contributing Writer

[Puget Sound Health Alliance](#) directors voted unanimously this week in calling for hospitals and physician clinics to bar pharmaceutical sales representatives from pitching doctors and giving patients free drug samples. The Alliance is a nonprofit organization working to improve the quality of health care. Its some 100 members include The Boeing Co., Puget Sound Energy, Washington Mutual Inc. and Starbucks Corp.

The Alliance believes that banning drug company sales reps will improve the quality of patient care by removing biased information about medications. "The Alliance encourages everyone to recognize pharmaceutical sales rep visits, free samples and other marketing items for what they are -- efforts to increase the sales of specific drugs," said Alliance Executive Director Margaret Stanley.

Said Dr. Ralph Rossi, president of [The Polyclinic](#) in Seattle, "We encourage doctors to get the latest information about effectiveness of brand-name and generic drugs from unbiased sources with no vested interest in treatment decisions other than good health outcomes."

The Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, a drug company trade group based in Washington, D.C., deplored the Alliance's position. "It's very bad policy," said Scott Lassman, the trade group's assistant general counsel. Sales reps, some of whom are nurses and pharmacists, are well trained and provide doctors with useful information about how drugs work and how doctors should give them to patients, Lassman said. Jeff Trehwitt, a spokesman for the trade group, said physicians can control their meetings with sales reps, and added that the trade group has adopted a voluntary marketing code that limits the value of gifts to doctors and specifies that doctors must find the gifts useful and helpful for their medical practices.

Some hospitals, according to the Alliance, already have limited or eliminated sales reps and free drug samples: [Harborview Medical Center](#), [Virginia Mason Medical Center](#), [University of Washington Medical Center](#), all in Seattle, and [Harrison Hospital](#) in Bremerton. Two large multispecialty medical practices have barred sales reps for some time. [The Everett Clinic](#) banned them in 1998, and The Polyclinic shut the door in 2003.

Everett Clinic spokeswoman Catherine Russell said the clinic's doctors have been "extremely satisfied with the program." Costs have fallen as doctors prescribe more generic drugs, and patients have saved on co-pays and out-of-pocket expenses, she said. "We estimate we save our commercial health plans \$18 million compared to their (doctor) network average on prescription costs," she said.

The Everett Clinic employs two full-time pharmacists, Russell said. "Their job is to optimize prescribing quality and cost. They also work with doctors to determine the best medications for Everett Clinic patients."

At The Polyclinic, Rossi said, "We've essentially taken the sales element out of the decision of prescribing medications. As a result, our patients receive a high quality of care at the most appropriate cost."

Polyclinic doctors now are more likely to prescribe generic rather than brand-name drugs, Rossi said. "Generics are safe, effective in treatment and save everyone money."

Polyclinic spokeswoman Tracy Corgiat said that saving patients money on drugs enables them more easily to comply with physician treatment recommendations. "When patients are compliant with treatment plans," she said, "they avoid catastrophic health events -- like heart attacks, strokes and diabetes complications -- which ultimately saves money for employers who insure them."