Drug reps may well have more influence on prescriptions than anyone in America other than doctors themselves.

Drug Detailing Greatly Influences Doctors’ Prescribing Habits

Carl Elliott

In detailing, sales personnel visit doctors to provide information about drugs and offer samples. Carl Elliott contends in the following viewpoint that detailing convinces doctors to write prescriptions for drugs that may be toxic or less effective than others on the market. He claims that drug representatives are paid according to how many prescriptions they convince physicians to write. So, they form personal relationships with doctors and give them gifts, the author contends, and he says this induces a sense of reciprocity. Carl Elliott, an author of several books on medicine and morality, teaches at University of Minnesota’s Center for Bioethics.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to Elliott, how does the return on each dollar spent on detailing compare to the return on direct-to-consumer advertising?

2. In what ways do doctors differ from drug reps, in the author’s contention?
3. How does Elliott describe “Northeast-Southwest” tactics?

Back in the old days, long before drug companies started making headlines in the business pages, doctors were routinely called upon by company representatives known as “detail men.” To “detail” a doctor is to give that doctor information about a company’s new drugs, with the aim of persuading the doctor to prescribe them. When I was growing up, in South Carolina in the 1970s, I would occasionally see detail men sitting patiently in the waiting room outside the office of my father, a family doctor. They were pretty easy to spot. Detail men were usually sober, conservatively dressed gentlemen who would not have looked out of place at the Presbyterian church across the street. Instead of Bibles or hymn books, though, they carried detail bags, which were filled with journal articles, drug samples, and branded knickknacks for the office.

The Modern-Day Drug Rep
Today detail men are officially known as “pharmaceutical sales representatives,” but everyone I know calls them “drug reps.” Drug reps are still easy to spot in a clinic or hospital, but for slightly different reasons. The most obvious is their appearance. It is probably fair to say that doctors, pharmacists, and medical-school professors are not generally admired for their good looks and fashion sense. Against this backdrop, the average drug rep looks like a supermodel, or maybe an A-list movie star. Drug reps today are often young, well groomed, and strikingly good-looking. Many are women. They are usually affable and sometimes very smart. Many give off a kind of glow, as if they had just emerged from a spa or salon. And they are always, hands down, the best-dressed people in the hospital.