



## GIFT AS A PROMOTIONAL MATERIAL AND THE RELATED PRESCRIPTION BEHAVIOUR OF PHYSICIANS IN BANGLADESH PHARMACEUTICAL MARKET

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### ABSTRACT

Pharmaceutical sector is declared as one the thrust sector in Bangladesh due to sharp rising in market growth in accordance with the world pharma market. Promotion of pharmaceuticals is one of the vital tools to increase the market share, and the physicians are thought to be the gateway to drug sales. So, the aim of our present study was to analyze physicians' attitude towards the gifts by the pharmaceutical companies and also the companies' attitude, thoughts and strategy about such promotional materials especially gift items. We also aimed to observe whether the promotional materials can affect the prescription behavior of the physicians. Among different types of promotional materials, gift was our major concern. To find the

objectives, a survey was conducted with two sets of questionnaires, one for 18 executives from 13 pharmaceutical companies and other for 20 physicians from different health institutes in Bangladesh. From the study, it was found that 85% physicians thought that gift was helpful to remember the brand name and 84.62% pharmaceutical companies believed that gifts could motivate physicians to prescribe a product. However, 53.85% companies believed that only 20% prescription behavior of physician can be influenced by gifts. This may be due to conscious or subconscious sentiments of indebtedness resulting from gifts. Although many physicians believe that they remain unbiased and uninfluenced by pharmaceutical marketing techniques. Pen, paper weight, pen holder, pad are found to be the most attractive and common gifts by both respondents.

**KEYWORDS:** Gift, Promotion, Physician, Pharmaceutical market.

## INTRODUCTION

Pharmaceutical industry in Bangladesh is now one of the fastest growing sectors over the last two decades and second largest contributor to the national exchequer after garments. According to IMS report of 2014, the total size of the pharmaceutical market of Bangladesh is approximate BDT 113 billion with an annual growth rate about 11%.<sup>[1]</sup> The local pharmaceutical industries of Bangladesh occupy around 80% of the total market share whereas the multinational companies (MNCs) having the rest. Actually the booster growth of the local pharmaceutical market started after the promulgation of 'Drug Control Ordinance' in 1982 in Bangladesh to make restriction on massive import of drugs and to encourage the local pharmaceutical industries to manufacture the same. Today as per the Directorate General of Drug Administration of Bangladesh (DGDA), there are about 257 registered pharmaceutical companies functioning in this sector.<sup>[2]</sup> The professional knowledge, skills and dedication of the people to this sector have made such development that 98% of the demand of drugs are fulfilled by the local companies, only 2% as some anticancer drugs, vaccines, hormones are imported.<sup>[1]</sup> Besides meeting local market demand, this pharmaceutical sector is exporting to about 87 destinations of the world including stringently regulated markets under EU/ UKMHRA /TGA-Australia /US FDA.

Due to this huge opportunity in this sector, the pharmaceutical companies in Bangladesh try to achieve a higher market share competitively. Among all the marketing tools, promotion is one of the major marketing tools to inform as well as to achieve the greater market optimization. So, the pharmaceutical companies always engage in competing with each other by promoting their products to the market, especially to the respective prescribers. Marketing strategy is different depending on the nature of the drug either over the counter (OTC) drugs or the prescription drugs.<sup>[3]</sup> Usually the OTC drugs are promoted to the retailers, consumers and prescribers, while the prescription drugs are only to the prescribers. Many big pharmaceutical companies think that doctors with huge prescribing power are the gateway to eventual drug sales, so, they spent a huge budget targeting on the prescribers and promoting drugs through advertising, gift giving, supporting medically related activities and sometimes financially. According to Komesaroff and Kerridge's statement, sometimes promotional budget and marketing to doctors reaches up a quarter to a third of their annual budgets.<sup>[4,5]</sup> It was also said that the pharmaceutical companies are spending about 15-25% of their revenues on promotion.<sup>[6]</sup> Another report expressed that the marketing costs exceeds 30% of their revenues, of which more than 90% aimed at physicians.<sup>[7,8]</sup> In the competitive pharmaceutical

industry, the relationship between sales representatives and prescribers is considered critical. It is estimated that sales personnel spend \$8000 to \$13,000 per year per physician to provide information about their products.<sup>[9]</sup> In 2001, US pharmaceutical companies spent more than \$21 billion promoting the sale of prescription drugs.<sup>[10]</sup> In the country under study in this paper, Bangladesh, the drugs prescribing decision is made by a general practitioner (GP) or specialist. Very few products like oral rehydration saline, zinc as antidiarrheal, contraceptive pills are promoted directly to customers or retailers. So, there is a big competition to promote the products to the prescribers to influence the drug sales, ultimately the pharma market share.

According to the code of pharmaceutical marketing practices, "promotion" means those informational and marketing activities, undertaken by a pharmaceutical company or with its authority, the purpose of which is to induce the prescribing, sales, or use. It includes the activities of representatives and all other aspects of sales promotion in whatever form, such as journal and direct mail advertising; participation in exhibitions; the use of audio-cassettes, films, records, tapes and video recordings; the use of view data systems and data storage devices such as memory discs accessed and reproduced on television apparatus, visual display units and the like; the provision of samples, gifts and hospitality.<sup>[11]</sup> Usually, in different pharma markets, the drugs are promoted to the doctors through gifts such as free samples, small stationery,<sup>[12]</sup> travel to conferences and educational events and some argue, cash.<sup>[4,5,13,19]</sup>

However, in Bangladesh pharma market, literatures, journals, books, samples and gifts are used as promotional materials for promoting drugs to the prescriber. Among those, gifts in different forms are most widely used, such as desktop items (pen, pad, paper weight, diary); personal use goods (laptop, watch, cloths, jewelry); household goods (crocker, air conditioner, furniture etc); food items and cash. As the pharmaceutical market is growing with a healthy growth rate along with a huge number of pharmaceutical industries functioning, so, the promotional budget of Bangladesh pharmaceutical company is uprising due to competition in the same market. On the contrary, the prescription pattern has been changed by the physician, seeming irrational prescriptions in many cases. Now-a-days pharmaceutical promotion attracts the attention of the people due to ambiguous and irrational prescriptions of pharmaceuticals by many physicians. It has become a big question whether they are influenced by the promotion of pharmaceutical companies or not. So far, as we

observed from the market that gifts as promotional material take a major share of the promotional cost. In this study, we wanted to realize the behavior of the physicians towards the gifts as well as the behavior and strategy of the pharmaceutical companies regarding promotional materials to the physicians. Specifically, the study was conducted to find a) the promotional strategy in Bangladesh pharmaceutical market, b) whether a gift play a vital role in promotional strategy, c) the items that are popularly used as gifts, d) whether gifts can motivate physicians in their prescribing behavior.

## **MATERIALS AND METHOD**

Since the focus of this study was physicians' attitudes towards the gift and the so called 'gift relationship' between pharmaceutical companies and physicians, so, the study population consists of pharmaceutical companies based in Dhaka city, Bangladesh having a good market share, promotional budget and contact with physicians; however, the practicing physicians from Dhaka, Sylhet and Rangamati city, Bangladesh, irrespective of their practice setting. To get the best knowledge on the purpose of the study, the survey method was taken as the better way to communicate with the pharmaceutical companies and physicians than any other option. The respondents from the pharmaceutical companies and the physicians are selected based on knowledge and clear conception on the relevant topics. The representatives from pharmaceutical companies can give idea about the total pharma market scenario, promotional expenses, promotional items especially gift items and the impact of gift items on the prescription behavior of the physicians. On the other hand, the physicians can give their opinion towards the promotional materials and the activities of the pharmaceutical companies relating to the promotion of drugs and the influence of it to them.

### **Data sources**

We have collected both primary and secondary data relating to the project. The primary data was collected from the representatives of the selected pharmaceutical companies and the physicians of Bangladesh. The secondary information was collected from the IMS reports, various other reports, journals, magazines and online sources. We have selected 20 physicians from different hospitals (such as Anwar khan modern hospital, Dhaka; Salimullah medical college hospital, Dhaka; ICMH, Dhaka; Monno general hospital, Dhaka; Rangamati hospital, Rangamati etc), clinics (Sugondha clinic, Dhaka; Janani Clinic, Dhaka; Sheba ploy clinic, Sylhet etc) and private practitioner located in Dhaka, Sylhet and Rangamati, Bangladesh. Among the selected pharmaceutical companies, the executives/representatives

from 13 top pharmaceutical companies located in Dhaka, Bangladesh such as Square pharmaceuticals Ltd, Incepta pharmaceuticals Ltd, Beximco Pharma, Eskayef Bangladesh Ltd, Radiant pharmaceuticals, ACI Ltd, Orion pharmaceuticals Ltd, Orion infusion Ltd, Delta pharmaceuticals Ltd, Sanofi-Aventis Bangladesh Ltd, Beacon pharmaceuticals Ltd, Aristopharma Ltd, ACME laboratories Ltd.

### Data collection

We have performed primary field investigation to get clear cut knowledge and perception on the relevant topics of our project from the study population. Therefore, we conducted a survey on the relevant topics with sample questionnaires. The survey instrument used in this study was two separate questionnaires for physicians and pharmaceutical companies. Structurally the survey instrument consisted of three sections. Physicians were given some multiple choice questions and requested to write down the probable answer that they like most that help them to prescribe a product. A same type but separate questionnaire was given to each company under study. Based on the responses received, no changes were deemed necessary in the final questionnaire. All data input, format, transformation and analyses were performed using different statistical methods.

## RESULTS

### Demographic characteristics of the respondents

The result of our survey showed that, 52.63% of the health professionals are prescribers or physicians from different hospitals, clinics and private practitioner; 47.37% of them are the executives of different pharmaceutical company (Table 1). The reason behind taking the almost similar percentage of respondents from both groups was to get a good understanding and impact of the so called gift-relationship between the company representatives and the prescribers.

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the respondents.**

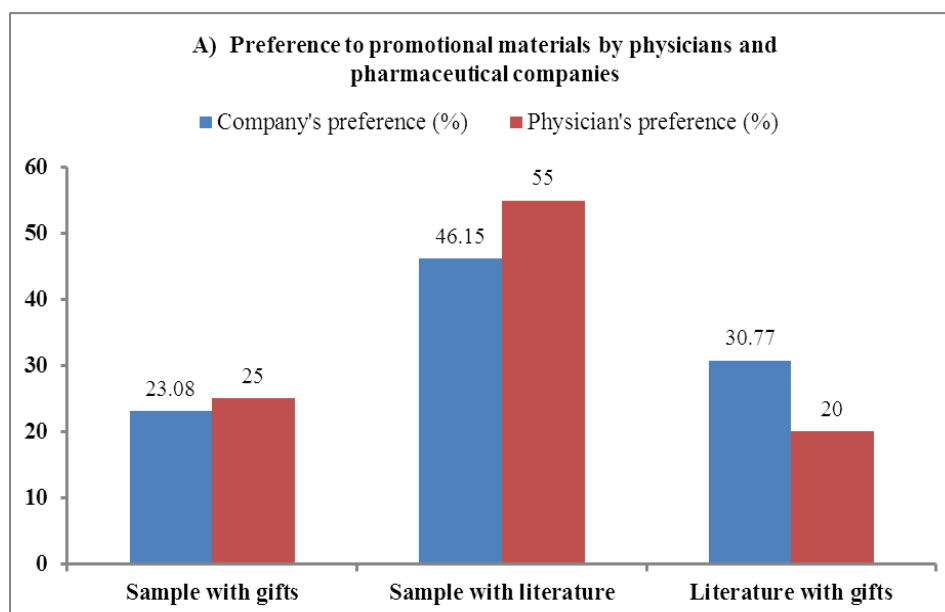
| Parameters                        | Frequency | Percent (%) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| <b>Health Professionals</b>       |           |             |
| Prescribers / Physicians          | 20        | 52.63       |
| From Hospital                     | 10        |             |
| From Clinic                       | 7         |             |
| Private Practitioner              | 3         |             |
| Pharmaceutical Company Executives | 18        | 47.37       |
| Total                             | 38        | 100         |

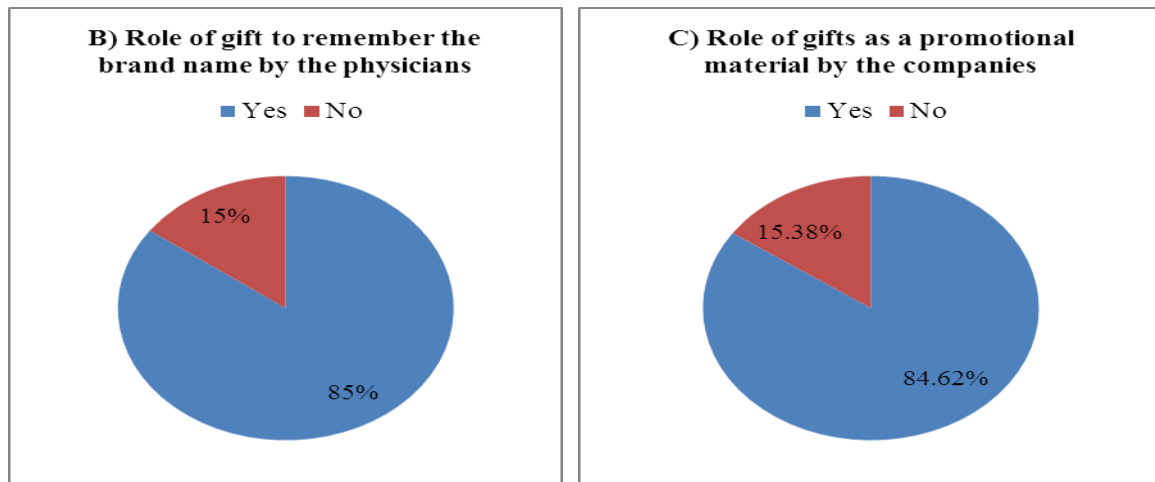
### Preference to promotional materials by physicians and pharmaceutical companies

In order to get the scenario of the promotional materials handled by physicians and pharmaceutical companies, a survey was conducted on both the parties respectively. According to our survey result, 46.15% of the selected pharmaceutical companies opined the promotion of drug by the promotional materials. Both respondents (physicians and pharmaceutical companies) showed a comparable preference to the widely used promotional materials. As per our survey results, pharmaceutical companies preference was 46.15% for sample with literature, 30.77% for literature with gifts, 23.08% for sample with gifts; while the physicians preference was 55%, 20% and 25% respectively (Fig. 1A).

### Role of gift items as promotional material

According to our survey result, 85% physicians under study responded that gift items help to remember the brand name of the drug (Fig. 1B), while 84.62% pharmaceutical companies found the gift items as influential promotional material (Fig. 1C).

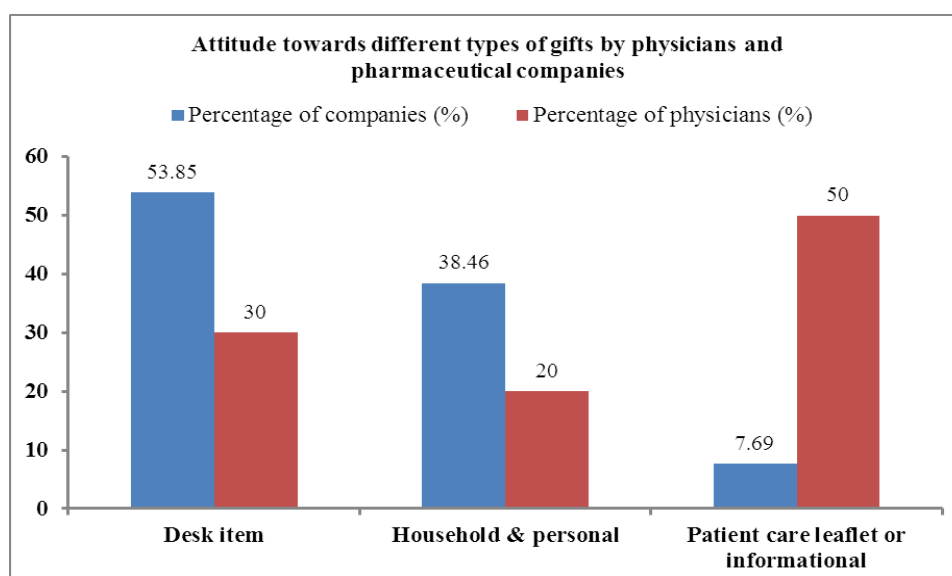




**Fig. 1: Preference to promotional materials and role of gift items by the physicians and pharmaceutical companies: A) Preference to promotional materials, B) Role of gifts according to physicians, C) Role of gifts according to companies.**

#### **Attitudes towards different types of gift items by the physicians and pharmaceutical companies**

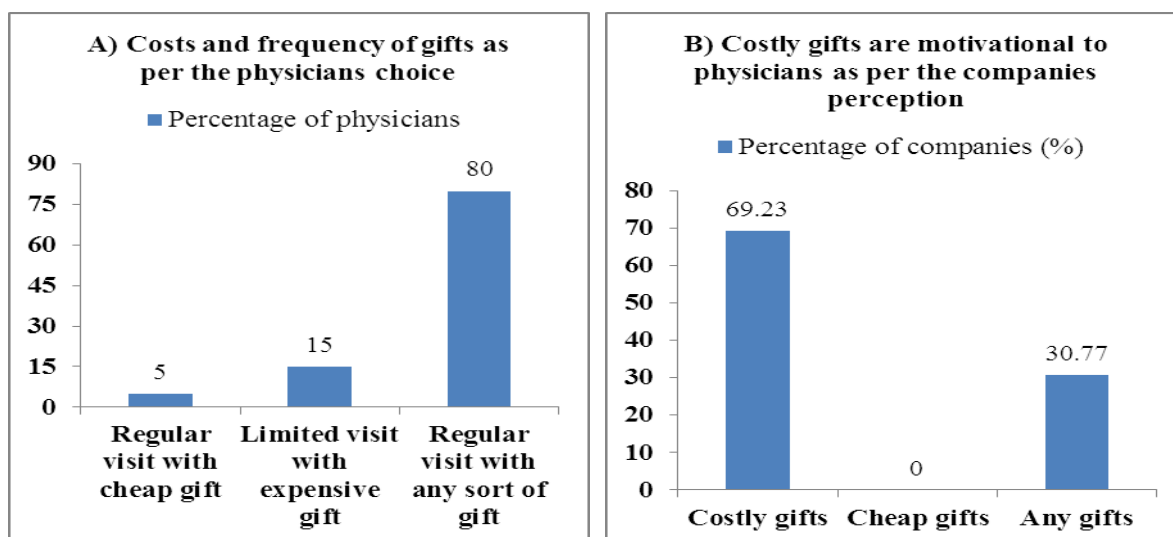
During the survey physicians were requested to show their preference about gift items by pharmaceutical companies. As our intention was to find the motivation of prescribing attitude of the physicians by the gift items, we asked them about type of gift, 50% answered for patient care leaflets or informational, 30% for desk items and the rest 20% for household gifts. However, the results from the pharmaceutical companies were as 7.69%, 53.85% and 38.46% respectively (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2: Attitude towards different types of gift items by the physicians and the pharmaceutical companies.**

### Costs and frequency of gift items handling by both respondents

From our survey on both respondents, it was observed that 80% physicians preferred regular visit with any sort of gift, 15% for limited visit with expensive gift (Fig. 3A). On the other hand, 69.23% of the pharmaceutical companies under study opined that costly gifts are more motivational to physicians. We also found that physicians do not like frequent gifts by the company. But pharmaceutical companies practice cheap but frequent gift in 30.77% cases (Fig. 3B).



**Fig. 3: Costs and frequency of gift items handled by the physicians and the pharmaceutical companies: A) Physician's choice over costs and frequency of gifts, B) Companies perception regarding costly gifts.**

### Influence of gifts by pharmaceutical companies and the prescription behavior of physicians

As per our survey result, 84.62% pharmaceutical companies believe that gifts can motivate physicians to prescribe a product. However, 53.85% companies found that only 20% prescription behavior of physician can be influenced by gifts (Fig. 4A). Again, 30.77% companies also expressed cheap but frequent gifts and the reference of senior physicians as the influential factors during prescribing a product. On the other hand, 85% physicians showed their interest on the quality of product and image of the company during prescribing a product; only 15% opined some influence of gift in their prescription pattern (Fig. 4B).

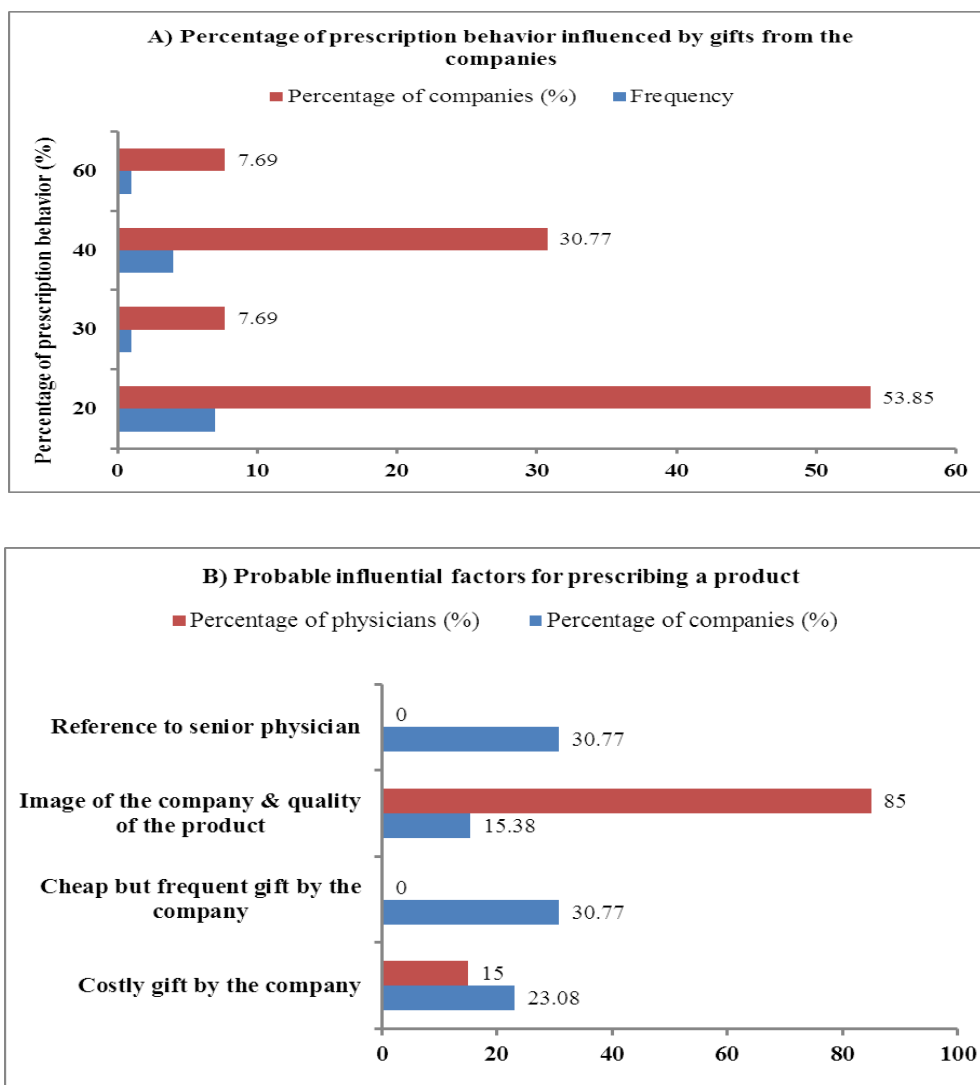


### Physicians' reaction to the termination of gift

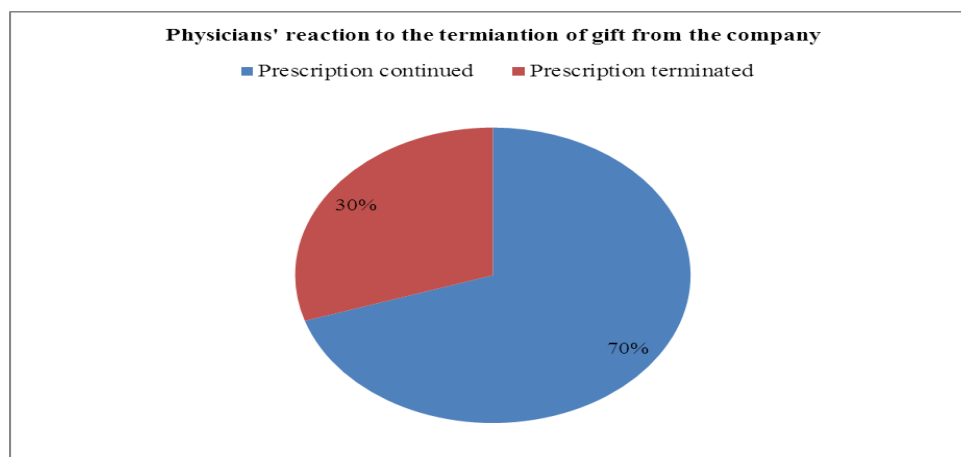
According to our survey result, 70% prescribers continue prescription of a product even if the company terminates the promotion (gift) of the product, until the company maintains the quality of product (Fig. 5).

### Acceptable and preferred gift items by both the respondents

We then asked the physicians to write down name of some gift items according to their preferences, also asked the same to the pharmaceutical companies that can be fruitful in.



**Fig. 4: Influence of gift items by pharmaceutical companies and the influential factors that can affect the prescription behavior of a physician: A) percentage of prescription behavior influenced by gift items, B) Probable influential factors affecting the prescription behavior of the physicians.**



**Fig. 5: Physicians' reaction on prescription due to the termination of gift items from the companies.**

Promoting their product to physicians. By this way, a big list came out, among them pen, paper weight, pen holder, pad are probably most attractive and common. As physicians use them frequently and pharmaceutical companies try to make them more attractive, thus these items get so popularity in promoting the products to the physicians.

## DISCUSSION

In order to get the physicians' attitude towards the gifts by the pharmaceutical companies, a survey was conducted on the physicians working in different health institutes. Most of them, particularly 55% prefer literature, 25% prefer gifts and the rest 20% prefer sample shown in Fig. 1. We have also found the influence of gifts by the pharmaceutical company on the prescription behavior of the physicians shown in Fig. 2 and Fig. 4. This indicates that most of the physicians prefer information and desk items from the pharmaceutical companies, although 85% physician mentioned that gift provided by the companies are satisfactory, useful and helpful to remember the brand name. Physicians (90%) support indication oriented gifts because these help them to remember the positioning of the brand also. Another interesting result is that physicians also do not like limited visit with expensive gifts. Most of them (80%) like regular visit with any sort of gift. This result indicates that they like to be remembered or to be updated with information by the company that also makes the physicians aware of the quality of the pharmaceuticals and image of the company. In order to get the information about the gift items that the pharmaceutical companies offer to physicians as promotional materials, we also had a survey on the companies' attitude, thoughts and strategy about such promotion. In our study, we found that 84.62% companies thought pharmaceutical marketing different from the conventional. Some companies believe that

ideally pharmaceuticals should be promoted by their quality and availability, not by any other promotional strategy. Thereby according to them, promotional strategy should be followed maintaining high quality of the product and making it available for the patients. None follow only one strategy with gift or sample or literature. It may be due to failure of the single material strategy in promotion. 46.15% companies prefer the use of sample with literature and the rest (53.85%) use gift with sample or with literature. So it is clear that gift is not very much popular to the company as a promotional material. But most pharmaceutical companies (84.62%) believe that gifts can motivate physicians to prescribe a product. Desk items may be more fruitful in promotion because physicians spend huge time in their desk and thus pharmaceutical companies prefer desk items (53.85%). Informational items are not popular (7.69%) to the companies; it may be due to failure of such items to attract the attention of physicians to the brand. The rest (38.46%) likes household & personal use gift items. So it is clear that companies evaluate physicians' attention attractive capacity of a gift item before selection.

Our results showed similar in line findings with the social science researches that showed that any type of gifts create a social impulse to reciprocate that can influence the behavior of the prescriber.<sup>[20,22]</sup> Although many physicians deny the potential motivation of gifts to influence their judgment,<sup>[22,23]</sup> it has been found in our study as well as in the other studies that prescribers' attitude towards the pharmaceutical products, industries and the prescribing behavior are influenced by industry promotional materials with gifts.<sup>[24,25]</sup> Another study demonstrated different opinion that promotional items including gifts have little influence on the prescribing behavior of physicians.<sup>[26]</sup> Besides, physician may approach the gifts differently. Some may accept gifts readily, some are strict in taking gift and some may be modest. However, we think that costly gifts may have some influence on the prescribers that may sometimes affect on the prescription behavior, may add financial burden on patients. In the field of study in Bangladesh, as pharmaceuticals are prohibited to promote to the mass, and a patient follow the prescription by the physicians, pharmaceutical companies try to motivate the prescribers in many ways. The Government of Peoples' Republic of Bangladesh follows certain law, rules and regulation to regulate such promotion. In our study, we found that most pharmaceutical companies believe that pharmaceuticals should be promoted by their quality and availability not by any other promotional strategy. They are concern about the effect of promotional expenses on the price of the product. We appreciate them. In the study, we also found that most physicians seek information regarding drug products. It is also

appreciable. Physicians seek medical books and journals but companies do not fulfill their demand. It may be due to their experience regarding such gift that does not help the promotion to their expectation. Many unethical and prohibited gifts mentioned in 'code of pharmaceutical marketing practices' are practiced by both pharmaceutical companies and physicians. According to the companies, cash is influential to some extent but no physicians quote it. However, we recommend both pharmaceutical companies and physicians to follow the rules and guidelines regarding gifts mentioned in 'code of pharmaceutical marketing practices' as a promotional tool in pharmaceutical market. Besides, some other recommendations may be useful for both sectors.

The physicians should-

- Follow the code of ethics,
- Try to avoid unnecessary gift items
- Allow only the gifts that help in his/her good professional practice.

The pharmaceutical companies should try-

- To emphasize more on the regular informational promotional materials, such as literature, journal, regular magazine etc.
- To justify a gift whether it is relevant to the practice or not,
- To practice regular gifts that are helpful for the physicians' sound practice.

## CONCLUSION

The Government of Bangladesh has declared the pharmaceutical sector as one of the thrust sector, because this sector is not only satisfying the local demand of medicines but also exporting in many countries. Some companies already have started producing some unmet drugs like vaccines, insulin and anticancer drugs. Besides, as one of the least developed countries (LDC), Bangladesh got the opportunity of patent exemption until 2033. The Bangladesh Government also made a promising plan to establish an API park immediately. So, promotion of pharmaceutical products not only to the physicians but also to the international platform may play a vital role in getting success to this sector nationally as well as internationally. That's why we tried to make a good and honest survey on our derived topic. But there may be some anomalies in information from the pharmaceutical companies and the physicians, as there was a requirement of some confidential records or information for the study and the persons might be unwilling to disclose such information. The anomalies

could be minimized if all parties under study provided real information regarding such very confidential questions and the limitation of the study were minimized. Because, the geographical area used in this study was limited, generalization of the results is restricted for all physicians and all pharmaceutical companies in Bangladesh. The study included some top pharmaceutical companies who control about 80% of the local market. But due to our limitation, we could not reach most other pharmaceutical companies. However from the study report, the overall promotional scenario of Bangladesh pharmaceutical market and the prescription behavior of the physicians can be guessed in great extent.

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