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# Industry payments to dermatologists: updates from the 2016 open payment data

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## Abstract

**Background:** Payments made to dermatologists by pharmaceutical and medical device manufacturing companies have become better understood following the advent of the Open Payments program. The purpose of this study was to analyze payments made to dermatologists in 2016 and evaluate trends in the payments from the previously published 2014 data.

**Methods:** The Open Payments database was filtered to include only dermatologists. The general and research payments made to each dermatologist were summed and categorized using a tier system. Finally, the mean, median, and range of the payments were calculated.

**Results:** We identified 10,744 dermatologists receiving payments totaling more than \$52.9 million in 2016, up from 8,333 dermatologists receiving a total of \$34.8 million in 2014. Of the dermatologists receiving payments, 77% received less than \$1,000 and 1% received >\$100,000. The ten highest paid dermatologists received about 10% of the total amount paid to dermatologists in 2016.

**Conclusions:** Industry payments to dermatologists increased in 2016 when compared to 2014. Physician and industry relationships have the potential to facilitate growth of medical fields. However, they have the potential to threaten the trust within the patient-physician relationship. Further studies are required to determine the effects of industry payments on patient-physician relationships.

*Keywords: dermatology, open payments, financial conflict of interest*

## Introduction

The Physician Payments Sunshine Act, enacted in 2010 as part of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, has increased transparency of the financial relationships between physicians and the manufacturers of pharmaceutical and medical devices. The Sunshine act requires that manufacturers report payments to physicians for research, consulting fees, speaking fees, travel and lodging expenses, and direct compensation [1]. These data are displayed publicly through the Open Payments Program, which is run by the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). Prior to the Open Payments Program, industry-physician financial relationships were not well-described. After the first full year of Open Payments data collection, Feng et al. searched the 2014 data for general and research payments to dermatologists [2]. The goal of the present study is to characterize the 2016 dermatology payments and compare the 2016 data to the 2014 data.

## Methods

This study is a retrospective database analysis of the CMS Open Payments database. The general and research payment data sets from 2016 were utilized, which include payments made from January 1, 2016 to December 31, 2016. The publicly available data

sets were filtered to include only dermatologists. Total payments to each dermatologist were calculated by summing the payments to each individual. Middle names were used to discriminate between dermatologists with the same name. Random spot checks were done utilizing the Open Payments Database search function to ensure accuracy. Statistical analysis was performed using Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics such as mean, median, and range were calculated.

**Results**

There were 319,309 payments to 10,744 dermatologists during 2016, including both research and general payments. The total amount of payments made in 2016 was \$52,892,928.76. From this, 5.8 million (11%) was in the form of research payments, while the remainder was in the form of general payments.

The mean payment to individual dermatologists in 2016 was \$4,887.20. The median payment to the dermatologists was \$286.30. Seventy-seven percent of paid dermatologists in 2016 received a total of less than \$1,000, with one percent of dermatologists receiving more than \$100,000 (Table 1) Payments to the top 10 dermatologists receiving industry payments totaled \$5,367,082.23, which amounts to 10% of total payments to dermatologists in 2016. The dermatologist who received the highest payment in 2016 received \$683,102.53.

**Discussion**

The amount of total payments to dermatologists rose from \$34.8 million in 2014 to \$52.9 million in 2016, an increase of 51.9% (Table 2). The number of

**Table 1.** Number of dermatologists by total payment amount.

Category	Number of Dermatologists	Percent of Total
<\$1,000	8229	77%
\$1000-\$10,000	1852	17%
\$10,000-\$100,000	550	5%
>\$100,000	113	1%

**Table 2.** Comparison of values from 2014 to 2016 with percent change.

	2014	2016	% change
Total Industry Payments to dermatologists	\$34,810,661.57	\$52,892,928.76	+51.9%
Number of dermatologists receiving payments	8,333	10,744	+28.9%
Mean payment to individual dermatologists	\$4,177.45	\$ 4,887.20	+17.0%
Median payment to individual dermatologist	\$297.59	\$286.30	-3.8%

dermatologists receiving industry payments increased from 8,333 in 2014 to 10,744 in 2016 (Table 2). The increase in payments might signify more dermatologists are being paid by industry. However, this increase may be attributable to improved compliance to reporting requirements.

The mean payment to individual dermatologists rose from \$4,177.45 in 2014 to \$4,887.20 in 2016 (Table 2). The median payment to individual dermatologists decreased from \$297.59 in 2014 to \$286.30 in 2016 (Table 2). Payments to dermatologists near the reported mean may represent a small fraction of the individual’s total income.

**Conclusion**

Relationships between physicians and industry are commonplace in the US. These relationships often facilitate novel research and growth of medical fields [3]. However, financial relationships between physicians and industry have potential to favor monetary gain at the expense of unbiased patient care [4, 5]. These relationships have the potential to threaten the trust within the patient-physician relationship. Reporting industry payments to dermatologists is an important step toward transparency and recognition of potential conflicts of interest. Further studies must be done to evaluate the effects of these payments on patient care.

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