

# Mixed reaction to firing at AstraZeneca

## AstraZeneca's firing of a sales director sparked comment over what motivates drugmakers.

By Thomas Ginsberg

Inquirer Staff Writer

AstraZeneca P.L.C., the pharmaceutical giant, received a mixed reaction yesterday to its firing of a Chester County sales director who had likened doctors' offices to "a big bucket of money."

"AstraZeneca did the right thing," said Richard Levick, a consultant on pharmaceutical public relations and president of Levick Strategic Communications L.L.C., of Washington.

"He is saying they put profits in front of customers. That may be truthful. But in the hope business, people want to think these companies are more than just profit-motivated," Levick said.

Michael Zubillaga of Kennett Square, regional sales director at AstraZeneca's Mid-Atlantic Business Center in Wayne, was fired Friday, just hours after his comments in an internal company newsletter appeared on the Internet and drew attention from bloggers, fellow sales representatives, and newspaper journalists.

In a Q&A section of the office's internal Oncology Newsletter, Zubillaga was quoted as urging his sales reps to view sales calls on doctors' offices as a way to "reach in and grab a handful" of money.

"The more times you are in, the more money goes in your pocket. Every time you make a call, you are looking to make more money," the newsletter quoted Zubillaga as advising his sales representatives.

Zubillaga did not return messages left at his Kennett Square home.

The notion that sales reps may be motivated by money is neither new nor insightful. But pharmaceutical companies in recent years have struggled - and expended millions of advertising dollars - to portray themselves as firms equally motivated by patient care.

"Managers will do whatever it takes to sell more drugs," said Kathleen Slattery-Moschkau, a onetime drug sales rep from Madison, Wis., who has become a vigorous critic of the industry.

Some "sales reps are motivated by money, so that's what they'll say. Other times they use patient-oriented tactics, because that will work with other reps," she said.

The fact that Zubillaga expressed the sentiment in print "is a shock," she added. "But I'm not surprised that, in this climate of trying to spin the P.R., that he was fired."

Peter Rost, a blogger and former marketing executive at Pfizer Inc. who obtained the newsletter from a person he described as an AstraZeneca "whistle-blower," said Zubillaga "just said what people think, but he was caught saying it, and in a company newsletter."

But Michael Luby, a drug-sales consultant and president of TargetRx Inc., of Horsham, said AstraZeneca did the right thing.

"His statement is wrong because it's so incomplete," he said. "The point is to help a patient *and* register a sale. These companies are not selling ice cream."

AstraZeneca, in statements Friday and Sunday, said it "repudiated" Zubillaga's comments and had launched an investigation to find out how the newsletter was produced without proper clearance.

It said the newsletter was dated "Winter 2007" but was not distributed until last week. It was not known whether other employees were being disciplined.

"Our company is disturbed by the content and particularly concerned about the impact the content of this unapproved newsletter may have on our employees and others," the Sunday statement said.

"In addition, we are concerned that a manager in our sales organization used this vehicle to communicate messages that directly contravene our core values as a responsible pharmaceutical company," it said.

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Contact staff writer Thomas Ginsberg at 215-854-4177 or [tginsberg@phillynews.com](mailto:tginsberg@phillynews.com).

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