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DRUG FIRMS SOFTEN SALES PITCHES TO CENTRAL AMERICANS

(BY MORTON MINTZ)

Major multinational pharmaceutical firms doing business in Central America have begun to tone down promotions of potent drugs to physicians by limiting claims of benefits while making fuller disclosure of risks.

This finding was made by Dr. Milton Silverman, a University of Californa drug specialist who compared what 15 global companies—American, Swiss and French—were telling Central American doctors in 1973 with what they began to tell them in 1976.

Silverman, who reviewed 26 widely used drugs, gave this summary of his findings:

• For nine medicines, the manufacturers narrowed claims of effectiveness and strengthened the warnings to make them comparable to those they provide physicians in the United States, where the Food and Drug Administration requires proof of safety and effectiveness.

• For two products, the producers were already making "reasonably full disclosure in 1973 and have continued to do so."

• For 11 drugs, the companies "are continuing to exaggerate the clinical values of the drugs and to minimize, gloss over, or totally ignore the potentially serious or fatal side effects."

• For four drugs, the manufacturers "elected to solve the problem by the expedient of not publishing anything in 1976 about them."

Probably the most dramatic change involved Chloromycetin, the Parke-Davis brand of an antibiotic, chloramphenicol, that causes a fatal blood disease in some users.

In the United States, the FDA has long required the Detroit firm to say in the official prescribing instructions and advertisements that chloramphenicol should not be used in "trivial infections," but should be restricted to a few serious or life-threatening diseases such as typhoid fever.