

The Affect of Direct-to-Consumers Advertising of Pharmaceuticals on Television, the Internet and in Magazines

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YAZ®, Nuvaring®, Nexium®, Vioxx®, Cymbalta®, Lunesta®, Lyrica®, Enablex®, Ambien®. These are some of the many names that we as consumers see in magazines, on television and on the internet; all of which are touting their ability to cure what ails us. These ads can be extremely influential and we often may not even realize that we are ailing until we see one of these advertisements. These ads ask you if you are suffering from this symptom or that symptom and we, the consumer, begin to believe that we need their wares. It is at this point, armed with the information we have gathered from too many late nights of TV watching and web browsing, having learned that what we need in our life is Cymbalta®, or some other prescription drug, that we approach our doctor, telling him our plan and how he (or she) will make it happen with a stroke of the pen on their prescription pad. This had not always been the case. We used to trust our physician's judgment and rely on them to decide what medication we should be taking, if any at all.

Pharmaceutical advertising was historically directed toward physicians and other health care providers, primarily advertised in medical journals. Health professionals receive extensive training over many years on medicines and pharmacology and are licensed to prescribe medications based on

this training. In the past, marketing was primarily aimed at the prescribing physician, often bombarding physicians with free trinkets such as pens, pads, cotton ball holders, etc.; but an ever-increasing use of direct-to-consumer advertising (DTCA) is taking place, in print, audiovisual, and digital media. As explained by Naik, et al, "In 1999, about 15.5 million Americans asked their physician to prescribe a DTC advertised drug and 12.9 million received the requested prescription. Pharmaceutical companies spent an estimated \$4.2 billion on DTCA in 2005" (Naik, Borreo et al. 2007). Direct to consumer marketing is being aggressively used by pharmaceutical companies to influence patient perception of available medications for specific diseases. This is a relatively new marketing tool used to target patients and it has had an affect on the way doctors may prescribe medication.

Affect of Direct-to Consumer advertising on Patient/Physician Relationships

Four out of five patients will get the drug prescription they request from their physician (Mintzes, Barer et al. 2002). One 3rd year medical student at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia put it quite poignantly: "The influence of the pharmaceutical advertising ultimately wrests no direct power from the doctor but is far more insidious. Rather, this strategy seeks to circumvent us intellectually - that is to say, it diminishes our role as respected consultants in the health care decision process and is an attempt to reduce us from health care providers to product providers" (Wakearn MS-III 2008).

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While DTC advertising remains a relatively small part of overall industry promotion, its

rapid spending growth in recent years (increasing an average of 28% annually from 1996-2001), frequent presence on television and in magazines, and extensive use in promoting newer, more expensive medications, has attracted the attention of critics who worry that it encourages patients to demand high-cost prescriptions for ailments that could be treated effectively with lower cost options. A survey published in April 2004 showed that of 634 physicians who had a patient ask about a specific prescription they had seen advertised, the physician wrote the prescription 39% of the time. Forty six percent of the physicians said the drug was the most effective treatment for the patient's condition, 48% said there were other drugs equally effective, but they wanted to please their patient and 5% reported that there were other options including some that were non-pharmaceutical that might have been more effective (Napoli 2007).

The advent of direct-to-consumer advertising has provided negative and positive contributions to the body of knowledge available to the consumer. There are some challenges in delivering this information to consumers in a manner that will be beneficial. An advertisement should be informative enough for a patient to hold a conversation with their physician about a medication. However, there are many risks involved. While it may be a positive that advertisements have become more consumer friendly, consumers are not trained to be able to take a position on what prescription medication they should be taking for any given condition.

These practices are not just relegated to the pharmaceutical industry but are also seeping into the medical device industry. Medical device advertising is on the rise, though it is only a fraction of the pharmaceutical industry. Currently, "the

device market is worth about \$50 billion in annual sales, compared with \$320 billion for pharmaceuticals (Editors 2008). In a survey of orthopedic surgeons, 77% felt that DTC ads were confusing and often mislead patients. The survey found that when patients saw an advertisement about a specific hip or knee arthroplasty, they were more likely to request that specific implant brand or type of surgery. These ads, most of the surgeons believed, did not properly educate the patients regarding possible complications and other factors (Napoli 2007).

While being an informed consumer is very important, the over-targeting of the patient-consumer has effectively taken the practice right out of the hands of the physicians. Patients come to their doctor's office armed with information they have acquired from some media outlet. Patients now question their doctor as to why they are not on this or that particular prescription drug. This may strain the relationship, as the patient may interpret the doctor's "inaction" as a sign that the doctor either does not have their best interest at heart or that the doctor is incompetent. The patient is missing the fact that the doctor is a trained professional and it is their job and their duty to care for them as best they know how. The direct-to-consumer advertising tends to undermine that premise. This type of marketing has permeated every media outlet: TV, radio, magazine and even the Internet.

Another ethical issue is that many consumers are under the impression that drug advertising is regulated by the FDA and that if a drug is advertised to the consumer then it must have been proven completely safe. While the FDA is active in the process of protecting consumers by reviewing the ads, it is not required for the ads to run (Adeoye and Bozie 2007). Of equal concern is the fact that most DTC advertisements seem to appeal to the emotions of people rather than educating. These ads often portray people struggling with

normal life situations: at parties or other social gatherings, interacting with children or friends – people and situations that consumers can relate to. These ads imply that if your life can be normal again if you take the particular drug. It is an effective method of appealing to the consumer's vulnerability and the pharmaceutical companies can easily take advantage of this. Given the multitude of symptoms that these drugs describe (many of which are a normal part of living at some point in our lives) the consumer is not on an equal playing level and it would be more appropriate for a physician to serve as the intermediary. In the television documentary, "Selling Sickness", the affects of the drug Paxil, manufactured by GlaxoSmith-Kline, is examined. This interesting piece looked at how pharmaceutical companies exploit life experiences such as shyness, occasional sadness or anger, implying that these can be signs of deeper psychological conditions, requiring medication. Paxil was marketed particularly to young girls and women. The marketers cleverly mastered "branding a condition" where if a consumer experiences a certain condition, the pharmaceutical companies have drug to combat it. The documentary goes on to explain how this type of marketing detracts from the human experience, implying that certain emotions are not a normal part of life and should be medicated(Scott 2005).

Use of Celebrities

Celebrities have also been useful in the pharmaceutical companies' quest to entice the consumers. When Olympian Dorothy Hamill, who is an arthritis sufferer, became the spokesperson for VIOXX, it fueled an excessive number of prescriptions before the painkiller's heart risks became known, potentially imperiling millions (Henderson Oct 30, 2005). A different type of utilizing celebrities is done in disease awareness. Lance Armstrong is the spokesperson for cancer awareness, not for a particular drug. This is a more ethical practice, as his celebrity will make him very recognizable by

millions of people and may, in fact raise awareness of this disease.

For every \$1 a pharmaceutical company invests in advertising to consumers, it rings up \$4.20 in prescription drug sales, according to a recent Kaiser Family Foundation study. A firm that matches stars with drug companies said celebrities make advertising returns more lucrative. Drug companies that pay \$200,000 to \$1 million to include a celebrity in a product campaign receive \$10 for every dollar spent, said Mick Kleber, who runs Spotlight Health's celebrity division. The Los Angeles company was behind the 1999 live web broadcast of singer Carnie Wilson's gastric bypass surgery. The previous year, 19,000 opted for the surgery. A year after Wilson's surgery, the number was 100,000, Kleber said. (Henderson Oct 30, 2005)

This practice of getting celebrity endorsers is also becoming more popular in medical device advertising. A Biomet, Inc. print and broadcast ad campaign features retired Olympic Gold Medalist Mary Lou Retton extolling the merits of the M2a-Magnum metal-on-metal hip replacement system, "Biomet changed my life" (Biomet 2006), Having a celebrity endorse such a device may increase patients who are influenced by these ads and may discuss the device with their physicians.

CONCLUSION

Another impact of DTC advertising, but not largely discussed is the impact on patient expectations and the implications for evaluating its role in the health-care system.

While these expectations can lead to inappropriate and excessive prescribing, they also may induce a placebo effect that might increase the clinical effectiveness of the advertised products. Also, a person who is ill is vulnerable and does not have the same capacity as someone who is merely shopping for a new pair of shoes. It is best for the physician to be in charge of guiding the patient to the

proper medication or treatment.

Direct-to-consumer advertising has the potential to stimulate demand by playing on the lack of sophistication of the consumer on the evidence that supports the use of one treatment over another. Somehow, we must maximize the public good and minimize the ability of advertisers to increase sales when evidence of the merits of a product is lacking or when that product poses undisclosed health risks. There has to be an active use of ethical thought in advertising to the consumer and potential patient. There is a need for greater regulation of pharmaceutical companies that choose to aggressively advertise to the consumer. For many years while growing up, I remember a Syms Mens' Clothing store commercial and their motto was "An educated consumer is our best customer". However, in today's age of pharmaceutical promises and misinformation advertised via internet, radio and magazine articles, it is not so clear if educating the consumer leads to positive outcomes. A TV commercial or magazine ad is insufficient to properly inform the average consumer on the risk/benefits of a drug. While knowledge is power, it reminds me that "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing".

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