

Drugs in the Newspapers

Communication about drugs through newspapers is a critical issue with a high ethical impact in a modern society, which is characterized by a strong consumerism, including that for drugs. Newspapers and journalists have in their hands a very powerful opportunity to influence the choices people make and this becomes more critical when it refers to health problems. Within the area of health, the drug market is a huge business, and even more so in those countries, such as the US and New Zealand, where direct to consumer advertising is permitted.

As a joint collaboration of a newspaper journalist in charge of the health pages of *Corriere della Sera* (the most read Italian newspaper), a medical journalist expert on drugs working in collaboration with different journals, and a clinical pharmacologist from the University and Reference Centre for Education and Communication within the WHO Programme for International Drug Monitoring, we present the following points on this issue for consideration by the readers of *Drugs*:

1. Within the framework of medical practice, drugs are an important part of modern therapeutic strategies. Since they are a component, within a broader treatment framework, communication concerning drugs should avoid terms such as 'miracle cure' or make claims for exclusivity. In our opinion, all drugs should be presented as part of a treatment programme, including other elements, some of which are not related to drugs, and that the reasons for medical decisions should be highlighted where possible. For the same reason, information (indications, contra-indications, cautions and adverse effects) about the molecule or class of molecules should be provided. Specifically, it should be remembered that if a drug has benefits, it also involves risks. Similarly, information should be provided about alternative treatments, whether involving drugs or not, with details of indications and problems. This is particularly important when drugs are self-prescribed and in the case of 'non-conventional' treatments.

2. At the same time, we would like to recommend caution when announcing the results of research and experiments with not only future drugs but all other therapeutic and diagnostic practices. Of course, news is news and must be reported, but news in the medical field may give rise to false hopes or prolonged misunderstandings. On the other side, negative news, even where correctly reported, sometimes gives rise to excessive alarm. Articles should remind readers of the distance between discovery and clinical practice, and should also contain information about the quality of the research carried out (e.g. number of patients, duration, study design) and mention of any conflict of interest by researchers. It should be remembered that humans are not mice and that results with animals are only a first step. Facts should be distinguished from speculation and conjecture.

3. Pharmaceutical marketing encourages drug use in situations that are not considered pathological or where the nature of the disturbance is controversial. The aim is to create new markets via complex communication campaigns involving the press, and creating 'fashionable' diseases and new health needs. Leaving aside the question of scientific debate and the responsibilities of various parties, we would like to recommend a more realistic understanding of what drives the drug market.

4. To guarantee broad coverage of medical issues, information should be complete and the sources transparent, particularly when they are drug companies. The most important scientific journals have decided to specify who pays for the research they cover in articles. Similarly, a journalist should ask him/herself who pays for press conferences, who is the customer of a press agent and who pays for the research. Readers should also be informed if there are financiers of apparently neutral sources, such as scientific societies, foundations and consumer or patient associations. Public financiers (Ministries, Universities, Regional Authorities and Health Authorities) should be no exception. This is not to kindle suspicions or point the finger, merely to guarantee that the information provided does not promote the interests of hidden sponsors.

5. We agree on the need to ask for transparency and must, therefore, ensure that journalists are transparent not merely as individual journalists (a question of personal ethics) but as a profession. It is normal practice not to reveal sources, particularly where a drug company is involved, and this is partly to avoid the suspicion of improper advertising. Instead, they should feel the need to be transparent with the reader and to specify sources, whether the tone of the article is positive or negative, naming the drug companies and sponsors of research and clinical trials. Sources with particular interests (not necessarily economic ones) are not of themselves unreliable or uninteresting, but should be quoted and put alongside other independent sources or sources with opposing interests. It would also be proper practice to ask experts who are contacted by the press about drug-related matters to declare whether they have particular interests in the matter they are asked to comment on.

6. The economic impact of drug use on the patient and the National Health System is also part of the normal duty of journalists (i.e. the cost of treatment with a drug set against the costs of other treatments [in the case of drugs of the same class, a straight comparison of prices], the type of reimbursement available [total, partial or zero, and for whom] and the availability of 'generic drugs' of the same class).

7. 'Conflicts of interest' may also include trips to press conferences, conferences and seminars by journalists, and evident 'tourist trips'. To eliminate any conflict, no sponsorship should be accepted and, for the conferences that are an important source of information, the newspaper should pay the bill. However, freelance journalists or journalists from small publishers who cannot cover event expenses may accept trips to important press conferences and high quality meetings/seminars if the relationships with the pharmaceutical companies are clear and transparent.

In conclusion, we consider that newspapers and working groups should establish internal regulations on the subject of reporting on drugs and make these public.

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