



Marketing Overdose

Campaigning against irresponsible drug promotion

CAMPAIGN BRIEFING

An introduction to the campaign against irresponsible drug promotion

Prescription drugs have helped millions of people enjoy a healthier life, however the marketing of these drugs is often irresponsible and a danger to public health. Doctors, the public and patients need independent, accurate and clear information about drugs, not marketing spin.

Unhealthy business

Drug companies spend more than US \$19 billion a year on marketing – that's far more than they spend on research and development. CI believes that such enormous budgets, coupled with irresponsible marketing tactics, are a threat to public health and can result in people being prescribed inappropriate and unnecessarily expensive drugs.

These huge marketing budgets also lead to companies having an unhealthy obsession with treatments that generate a big profit but add little additional medical value. Meanwhile the number of innovative new drugs is declining and drugs for tropical diseases that effect 1 in 6 of the world's population continue to be neglected.

Drug companies' marketing targets

Most drug marketing is directed at doctors, however it can also reach the public and patients despite most countries having a ban on direct to consumer advertising (DTCA).

Doctors

When people visit their doctor they expect the advice they receive to be in the best interests of their health, but behind the scenes doctors are being bombarded with drug company gifts and advertisements, visits from sales reps, and educational events sponsored by drug companies.

- **Gifts.** Drug companies give doctors gifts to boost sales of their products. In extreme circumstances the value of gifts is linked to how much of a product the doctor prescribes. More often they are a way of increasing the ties between the doctor and the company or product. Gifts have included holidays, electrical appliances and generous hospitality at medical conferences. Studies have shown that even small gifts, such as pens, can be effective in making the doctor feel the need to respond.
- **Promotion.** Despite requirements to produce clear accurate information in all promotion, there are still many cases of companies misleading or omitting information and promoting drugs for conditions they are not licensed for.
- **Payments.** Most companies also employ doctors to research, trial or write about their products. As doctors also prescribe or influence the purchase of some of these products there is a direct conflict of interest.

The public

Prescription drugs are a dangerous product in marketing terms. They hold the promise of good health, but taken by the wrong person or in the wrong dose they can be lethal. Prescribing these drugs needs to be done on the basis of independent and accurate information and by a trained professional. For this reason direct to consumer advertising (DTCA) has been banned in all countries except the United States and New Zealand. However this hasn't stopped the drug companies trying to reach consumers by overturning or sidestepping the bans.



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- **Challenging the ban on DTCA.** In Europe drug companies want a greater role in providing information to patients, and there is even talk of a 'Pharma TV' channel. Consumers International believes this will be marketing in everything but name. In Canada a media company is challenging the ban. Advertising revenue from drug companies is a big earner for media companies in the US where public advertising of prescription drugs is allowed.
- **Disease awareness campaigns.** These campaigns have, in some cases, been accused of 'disease mongering' or taking a condition that is seen as non-medical (except in extreme cases) and proposing a medical cure. Through use of logos, design or text the company can also associate their product with the medical condition.
- **The Internet.** The Internet is fertile ground for sidestepping regulations on marketing because it is so hard to regulate.

Patients

An obvious marketing target for drug companies is people who have already been diagnosed with a medical condition. Not only are they likely to use their product, they are also likely to be strong advocates for treatments relating to their condition.

Patient groups do valuable work that deserves funding, however by funding these groups there is a danger that drug companies are subtly marketing their products to the group's members. There are also concerns about the influence this funding may have on the groups' advocacy. It is very difficult for groups to question or criticize the policies or practices of major donors.

Time for a cure

Between 2002 and 2005 twenty large drug companies breached the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry Code of Marketing Practice 972 times. Yet the International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers' Code on Marketing, which is meant for countries that don't have a national code, still hadn't received a complaint ten months after it was relaunched in January 2007. For the sake of our health, and our health budgets, doctors, the public and patients deserve a better deal.

At the World Health Assembly in 2007 member states were urged to

"enact new or enforce existing legislation to ban inaccurate, misleading or unethical promotion of medicines, to monitor drug promotion and to develop and implement programmes that will provide independent non promotional information about medicines."

CI supports this call and calls on all governments to take urgent action. The drug industry also needs to do much more to tighten up and enforce marketing codes at a company, national and international level. CI is calling for:

- **A ban on gifts** to doctors and transparency in all transactions between drug companies and medical professionals and institutions.
- **Transparency in the funding** of patient groups, continuing medical education and 'disease awareness campaigns' and work towards the establishment of a blind trust mechanism for industry support in these areas.
- **An end to** promotion that has misleading or omitted information or misrepresents what a drug is licensed for.
- Greater provision of **independent information** about prescription drugs.

To join the campaign or for more information go to www.marketingoverdose.org

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Consumers International (CI) is the only independent global campaigning voice for consumers. With over 220 member organisations in 115 countries, we are building a powerful international consumer movement to help protect and empower consumers everywhere.

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