

Ottawa must protect public from drug ads

From Medical Reform - Vol. 21, No. 4, Spring, 2002

By Rosana Pellizzari

The marketing of prescription drugs directly to the consumer is legal in only two countries: New Zealand and the United States. And in 2000, the U.S. drug industry spent \$2.47 billion on marketing their products to Americans and anyone else who happens to watch American TV.

But selling drugs directly to consumers is hazardous to their health. If Canadians aren't vigilant, we may see similar ads in Canada before long. Technically, it is illegal to market drugs directly to the public in Canada. But, thanks to a loophole, most of us are familiar with the somersaulting middle-aged man who sells us Viagra, or the billboards for Zyban, a stop-smoking aid, which feature two lovers enjoying their afterglow minus the cigarette.

This direct-to-consumer marketing occurs in Canada under the guise of "disease awareness information," in essence a loophole. Drug manufacturers can mention the name but not the purpose of the drug, hence the somersaulting male. Alternatively, manufacturers can describe a disease but not the drug hence the ads for migraines which urge viewers to speak to their doctors or to call for more information.

Consumers may think the advertising of drugs promotes better awareness and more choice. But drugs are different from most consumer products. In 1997, 10 per cent of Americans took prescription drugs which were subsequently pulled off the market because they were found to be unsafe.

By marketing new drugs to consumers manufacturers put pressure on doctors to prescribe their products in response to patients' demands. In a study published in last month's British Medical Journal, researchers asked patients and doctors in Sacramento, California and Vancouver, about prescription drugs. Patients reported they had requested a drug in 12 per cent of the visits surveyed.

In about half the cases, in which patients requested an advertised drug, physicians reported feeling ambivalent about prescribing. That was four times higher than the 12 per cent of times a doctor felt ambivalent about prescribing a non-requested drug. The study showed that patients who requested a drug were more likely to receive it, despite the physician's reservations.

An analysis of drug marketing in the U.S., published in the New England Journal of Medicine a few weeks ago, warns that doctors need to "assist patients in evaluating health-related information obtained through direct advertising." The authors found that the use of direct-to-consumer marketing has grown disproportionately in comparison to other forms of drug promotion. Annual spending tripled between 1996 and 2000.

In a 1997 survey of U.S. family doctors, 71 per cent believed that drug companies' targeting of consumers pressured physicians into prescribing drugs they would not ordinarily prescribe.

Doctors critical of direct-to consumer marketing argue that advertising leads to increased work loads for doctors who are then required to interpret the information presented by the drug company. The New England Journal of Medicine study reported that in surveys of Americans, 25 per cent "initiated conversations" with their doctors about a drug they saw advertised on television.

Canada has become incredibly lax about enforcing restrictions on drug advertisements. The Canadian Institution on Health Information says Canadians now spend more on drugs than on doctors. In fact, drugs represent the fastest growing expense in the health care budget. Our nation is in the midst of a discussion on the sustainability of our health care system as part of Roy Romanow's Royal Commission.

Besides dropping the barriers that many Canadians face in accessing medically necessary drugs, we must call for a ban on direct-to-consumer marketing in the interest of the public good.

New Zealand is thinking of imposing a ban on drug advertising. Australia recently decided to continue its ban. Now is the time for the federal government and Health Canada to resist pressure from the powerful drug lobby and do the right thing by protecting the public from the profit-oriented and potentially hazardous targeting of consumers.

First appeared March 8, 2002 as one of Dr. Rosana Pellizzari's columns in the Toronto Star