

DISEASE MONGERING: THE ROLE OF MEDICAL JOURNALS

Dear Sir,

Shankar and Subish in the April 2007 issue of the Singapore Medical Journal did an excellent job in exploring the various aspects of disease mongering, including the role played by doctors and medical journals in tackling this difficult issue.⁽¹⁾ There is no disagreement to the fact that medical journals have played a paramount role in terms of educating the health professionals on this controversial phenomenon. However, we believe that there is another substantial factor to be considered in this whole issue: drug advertisements published in medical journals.

Pharmaceutical marketing has been argued to be an organised and effective means of educating physicians regarding the safety and effectiveness of medications;⁽²⁾ but there are certain caveats to this controversial argument. A critical evaluation of 345 distinct drug advertisements done in Pakistan reported 18% of drug advertisements to be ambiguous, exaggerated or controversial. A dire need to equip health professionals with the art of critical appraisal of pharmaceutical promotional claims has been rightly pointed out by the authors.⁽³⁾ However, we believe that there is also a need to trim down the publication of drug advertisements in medical journals which are promoting the disease mongering prototype. One can argue that the mass media plays a much bigger role in this regard by appealing to the consumers directly; however, the direct consumer marketing approach works on an individual basis. On the other hand, successful advertisement of the same drug to even a single doctor will result in a large number of irrational prescriptions. An appraisal of drug advertisements published in medical journals by three independent reviewers reached a conclusion that relying solely on information presented in these drug advertisements can potentially lead to inappropriate prescription in 44% of cases.⁽⁴⁾ Similarly, Villanueva et al assessed the advertisements for lipid-lowering and antihypertensive agents published in Spanish medical journals. It was found that 44% of the promotional statements were not supported by a quoted reference.⁽⁵⁾

Well-defined guidelines formulated by the US Food and Drug Administration to regulate Direct-to-Consumer advertisements have long been established.⁽⁶⁾ But these guidelines do not address the advertisements published in medical journals. The publication of drug advertisements in journals is undoubtedly a very complex issue with certain implications involving the financial model of medical journals.⁽⁷⁾ However, as a first step, there is an emergent need for stringent scrutinising of drug advertisements selected for print in medical journals by the editorial staff. Advertisements with an ambiguity in the cited evidence, exaggerated claims, false reassurances and those which conceal vital information should be earnestly discouraged. By taking this step, medical journals can become the pioneers in promoting the healthy trend of rational and fair drug prescription by the health professionals.

Yours sincerely,

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