Is patient information on prescribed drugs just another form of advertising?

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Having followed the heated debate on proposed changes to European drug advertising legislation, I cannot help but notice a familiar ring to Shaw’s endorsement of the European Union’s patient information initiative, including her many uses of the words information, factual, and regulated, but infrequent mention of “advertising.”

The initiative’s provisions to make approved patient leaflets, monographs, and European public assessment reports more accessible are uncontroversial; easier access is a boon. It is the increased leeway for industry to produce overtly or covertly promotional websites that raises a red flag, whether or not these are pre-vetted.

Shaw castigates opponents to this proposal as “uncomfortable with the idea of empowered patients,” without noting the universal opposition among non-industry funded European consumer and patient groups, the very sector that champions consumer health rights. Shaw chairs DataPharm, funded by “about 190 pharmaceutical companies.” Her main argument seems to be that the EU proposal is too timid because of “its anxiety to restrict the drug industry.”

Why be anxious? It is worth looking at other countries’ experiences. Canada has partially subverted its ban on prescription drug advertising, considering “disease awareness” campaigns to be “information” if neither brands nor company names are mentioned. A recent pre-vetted advert suggests that if men over 40 feel grumpy, fall asleep after dinner, or have “lost that loving feeling” they may have low testosterone.

Neither the advert nor website explains how unlikely this cause is or mentions potential cardiac risks of testosterone gel. Shaw highlights poor information access in Germany, despite its excellent independent consumer drug bulletin, Gute Pillen-Schlechte Pillen (Good Pills-Bad Pills), which combines rigorous evidence reviews with a user friendly format. Rather than weakening EU drug advertising legislation, governments could do much to meet public needs by supporting a range of similar independent information initiatives.

Competing interests: BM has no competing financial interests. The German drug bulletin I mentioned is a member of the International Society of Drug Bulletins (ISDB). My organisation, the Therapeutics Initiative, is also a member of ISDB.

1 Shaw J. Patient information on prescribed drugs. BMJ 2011;342:d1924. (3 May.)
2 DataPharm. How we’re funded. www.datapharm.org.uk/Pages/about-datapharm#funding.

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