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Should prescription drugs be advertised directly to consumers?

Proponents say that the ads inform patients about diseases and treatments, encourage people to seek medical advice, help remove stigma associated with conditions, and provide revenue to fund research and development.

Opponents say the ads misinform patients, promote drugs before safety can be known, stigmatize *normal* conditions like wrinkles and low testosterone, waste medical appointment time, and lead to overuse of prescription drugs.

—Only the USA and New Zealand say it's OK. Yet a new study finds that US authorities take such a lackadaisical approach to consumer drug ads that many of the commercials violate federal guidelines, and the quality of information presented is alarmingly low.

“The ads don't often represent the best treatment or medication available,” said Joseph Ross, an associate professor of medicine and public health at Yale University and the study's lead researcher. “They're selling products.” (Every \$1.00 spent on advertising prescription drugs is estimated to increase their retail sales by \$4.20.) The main problem is that these are complicated medical issues, and you simply can't communicate everything a patient needs to know for an informed decision in under a minute.

As a result, according to the Yale study, “the information provided is unreliable and potentially misleading.” On the other hand, Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, an industry group, says direct-to-consumer ads are “designed to provide scientifically accurate information so that patients are better informed about their healthcare and treatment options....it encourages patients to visit their doctors for important conversations that might otherwise not take place.” Ads should be allowed as protected free speech.

Actual medical practitioners say that direct to consumer drug aids are dangerous. The American Medical Assn. called for a ban on such ads in 2015, arguing that the billions of dollars drug companies spend on marketing pushes prescription drug prices higher, and “inflates demand for new and more expensive drugs,

even when these drugs may not be appropriate.” (\$5.2 billions in 2015) (As of May 2011, the average number for prescriptions for new drugs with DTC advertising is nine times greater than prescriptions for new drugs without ads.)

The Yale study examined 100 direct-to-consumer ads between January 2015 and July 2016. Researchers found that about 3/4 of the ads were for chronic conditions such as arthritis and diabetes—guaranteeing return business. They also found that most target young or middle-aged women. 13% of ads, all for diabetes medications, suggested off-label uses for weight loss and blood pressure reduction. This is significant. Under current FDA rules, prescription drugs may only be marketed for approved purposes, such as a diabetes pill that helps keep blood sugar under control. Unverified benefits like weight-loss, that is, off-label use, can't be part of the sales pitch.

In a recent report, the National Academy of Sciences said drug companies spend substantially more on marketing and administration than on research and development.” It called on Congress to “disallow direct-to-consumer advertising of prescription drugs as a tax-deductible business expense” to refocus manufacturers' priorities.

A majority of Americans think prescription drugs shouldn't be advertised on TV, according to a 2016 poll.

On one hand, direct to consumer drug ads are opposed by doctors, academics, global healthcare authorities, nearly all other developed countries, and most Americans. On the other hand they're backed by multibillion-dollar drug companies. So I guess we're stuck with them....

—David Lazarus, April 10, 2018. Los Angeles *Times*.