Improving Public Health?
Drug Promotion and the Rational Use of Medicines

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WHO Ethical Criteria for Medicinal Drug Promotion (WHO, 1988)

Promotion is defined as:

“…all informational and persuasive activities by manufacturers and distributors, the effect of which is to induce the prescription, supply, purchase and/or use of medicinal drugs.”
Drug Promotion

• Is a global concern
• Contributes to the **irrational** use of medicines
• However…
  • Less than half of countries report that they regulate promotion (46%)
  • Most countries rely on industry self-regulation

Types of promotion

• Sales representatives
• Free Samples
• Journal advertising
• Direct-to-consumer advertising
• Funding of physician ‘opinion leaders’
• Gifts – large and small
• Sponsored continuing medical education, symposia and conferences
• Sponsorship of patient groups, professional societies, guideline development
• Market seeding ‘research’
• Public relations, advertorials, ghostwriting
"Gabapentin [Neurontin] was promoted by using education and research, activities not typically recognized as promotional. “independent” continuing medical education, “peer-to-peer” selling by physician speakers, and publications…"

Prescriptions for gabapentin by diagnostic category

Vioxx (rofecoxib)
Images of a healthy & active lifestyle with celebrity endorsements, speak louder than words
VIOXX (rofecoxib): why was prescribing so widespread

On the market from 1999 to 2004

• Prescribed to 80 million people
• US spending on advertising $550 million
• More than Pepsi-Cola in 2000 – same year as VIGOR trial published
• VIGOR trial: 4-5 times risk of heart attack
• No more effective than other anti-inflammatory drugs for arthritis
• Estimated 88,000-140,000 extra heart attacks in U.S., 40% fatal (Graham 2005)

“…the information used contained misleading statements and omissions likely to cause medically unjustifiable drug use or to give rise to undue risks.”

Peru 2006

Same drug, same company, same unethical promotional campaign

- Unapproved use
- Illegal direct-to-consumer advertising
- Costly and not very effective

Pakistan 2005: 1-2 day relief claim

Canada 2005

Excellent safety, side effect profile similar to placebo?

- USA 2003: illegal ad (below) no risks, unsubstantiated 3-day relief claim
- USA 2004: warning of serious risks
- USA 2007: safety withdrawal
Guatemala 2006

Countering unethical promotion effectively:

- Enact and/or enforce legislation
- Train students (both before and after graduation),
- Provision of reliable non-commercial therapeutic information to professionals and the public
- Monitor medicines promotion

MEASURES CONTAINED IN THE RESOLUTION
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