any publications have reported that promotion influences the prescribing and the use of medicines. For example, reviews of almost 3000 articles in the WHO/HAI database on promotion confirm that promotion does influence how doctors prescribe, that health professionals underestimate the power of this influence; that promotional material is often relied upon as information; and that company-sponsored promotional activities tend to show a company’s medicine in a positive light. The collected research also show that promotion’s influence starts early in medical and pharmacy students’ training.

For this reason, in 2004-2005, educators around the world took part in an international, cross-sectional survey conducted by WHO and HAI aimed at mapping educational initiatives underway to teach medical and pharmacy students about pharmaceutical promotion.2 Hundreds of teachers provided detailed information about their work in this field. The responses clearly showed that despite the responsibility entrusted to doctors and pharmacists to prescribe and dispense medical treatment, health-care professionals receive little or no instruction on how to assess pharmaceutical promotion and how to understand its often subtle influence on their behaviour.

The survey found that while many schools and colleges included this topic in their curriculum, many spent less than one day on the topic—with some schools devoting only one to two hours to the issue. This suggests that even though medical and pharmacy educators recognize the need for instruction on pharmaceutical promotion and sometimes incorporate it into their work, the time given to it is at best limited. The survey results signalled a need to further develop curricula in this area.

A new tool
As a result of the survey, WHO and HAI have created a new tool to educate students before they start prescribing and dispensing medicines. This draft manual, entitled Understanding and responding to pharmaceutical promotion: A practical guide, is modelled on and should be seen as a companion module to the WHO’s earlier publication Guide to good prescribing.3,4 The manual, produced as part of a collaborative project, provides practical training for students to recognize a variety of promotion techniques and to know how to access quality, independent information about medicines. It is a first step to prepare medical and pharmacy professionals to deal with the effects of marketing on decision-making in their patients’ interests.

The manual’s contents
The publication’s nine chapters include a description of techniques used to influence how doctors prescribe and pharmacists dispense. It provides an overview of the material that should be included in pharmaceutical advertisements for health professionals (and consumers) and explains how it often falls short of the information needed for good decision-making. It raises questions about conflicts of interest between researchers, prescribers, dispensers and companies and how this cooperation is often hidden or is unknown to the public. The manual goes on to explain how promotion on medicines is regulated in different countries and explores its effectiveness in promoting public health. It also explains how health professionals can raise questions or lodge complaints about unethical or inappropriate promotion in their own country. Importantly, the publication highlights the need for independent, unbiased, comparative information about medicines and lists many sources, so that health professionals have increased options when searching for reliable information about medicines. The manual’s authors hope that exploring this spectrum of related topics can better prepare students to analyse information about medicines and make choices that will contribute to the health of patients.
The next steps

The draft manual will now be pilot tested and evaluated at a number of sites using English and Spanish versions of the text. The testing will evaluate the effect on students’ knowledge, attitudes and skills in understanding and responding to pharmaceutical promotion. It will also provide feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the manual’s content and the resources provided.

Afterwards, the manual will be revised based on feedback and evaluation data. In addition, schools not taking part in the field tests are encouraged to use the manual now and then share their classroom experiences so that they can enrich the revised version of the manual. After the pilot tests, it is hoped that the manual will be released as a joint WHO/HAI publication and made available as a free access resource. A teachers’ guide is also being developed to help educators present the manual’s material in an interesting and culturally relevant way.

HAI is currently distributing copies of the draft manual to educators interested in reviewing it and using it with students. Those wishing to receive a copy of the draft manual in English, Spanish or Russian, can contact Lisa Hayes, Coordinator, Global Projects, Rational Use of Medicines, Health Action International (HAI)-Global, Amsterdam. E-mail: lisa@haiweb.org.

References


To view the material in the WHO/HAI database, see: http://www.drugpromo.info/