

# DRUG PROMOTION

## Drug marketing in French-speaking African countries

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**P**HARMACEUTICAL companies are often criticised for the quality of their drug advertisements in developing countries. For the first time a quantitative study spotlights this problem in francophone Africa, and the results give cause for concern. The pharmaceutical industry remains the major source of direct and indirect information on drugs, the quality of which is a critical factor in correct therapeutic practice. Drug advertisements in developing countries are frequently criticised for carrying inaccurate and contradictory information relative to that available in the industrialised countries<sup>1</sup>. Concerned by the lack of quantitative analyses of the reliability of pharmaceutical advertising in French-

ment indicating that further information was available on request. These items were then compared with the French official data sheet based on the scientific file submitted by the manufacturer to obtain registration and marketing approval. All advertisements in France must include this information, which is given in the monographs of the *Dictionnaire Vidal* - the official French drug compendium. We evaluated drug advertisements in Africa in relation to French legal requirements because all six journals have addresses in France (in four cases only in France) and the company's address in 93.5% of the advertisements was in France. Advertisements were judged to conform to French legislation (1990 edition of the *Dictionnaire Vidal*) unless there was a serious omission of side effects or contraindications, or an exaggeration of indications. These criteria were scored as "similar" or "different", "different", signifying an important difference in content and not simply a difference in wording.

41 of the 141 advertisements (29.1%), published by 25 companies, carried all the information required by law, occasionally word for word.

100 (70.9%) of the advertisements differed from French legal information in at least one respect (Table 1).

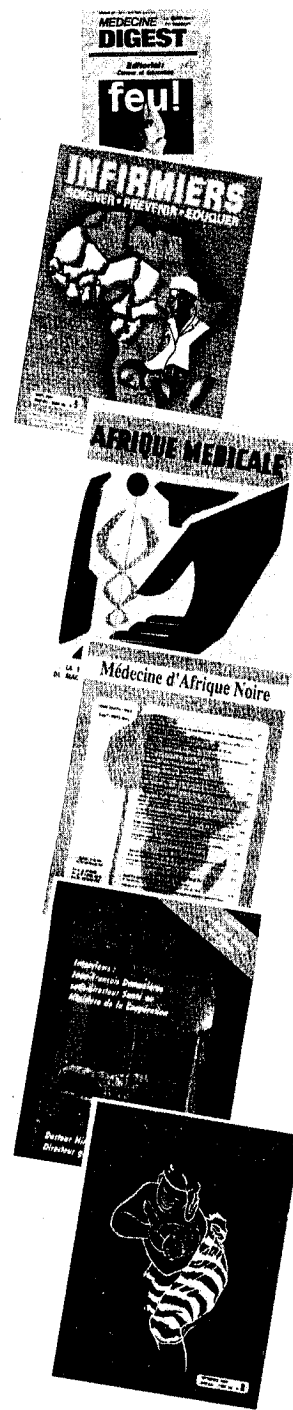
19 advertisements (13.4%) did not mention the generic name of the product or the company's address, or listed an indication with no mention of the dosage, side effects or contraindications and no statement to the effect that more information was available on request. These advertisements therefore failed to meet minimum requirements of the code of conduct published by the IFPMA (International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers' Associations).

### DISCUSSION

The fact that French-language journals in Africa carry so many advertisements shows the keen interest of pharmaceutical companies in both this type of publicity and the potential readership. Advertising space accounted for a large proportion of the printed matter in all the journals (23-55%), but those aimed at paramedical personnel (*Infirmiers* and *Sages Femmes*) contained the highest proportion of advertising pages (49-55%). The proportion of "essential" drugs (WHO list) was 24.8%, a very low figure given the need for essential drugs in African countries. The distribution of the drugs according to their therapeutic class appeared to be well adapted to local requirements, although this did not mean that the specific formulations concerned here were rational or appropriate.

The pharmaceutical companies which advertised in the African journals we surveyed were mainly French, American and Swiss multinationals. The over-representation of French companies relative to their place in the world market clearly reflects their importance in that of francophone African nations. Their domination is reinforced by the fact that most companies based in other countries export to francophone Africa via French subsidiaries<sup>2</sup>. Apart from the United States which promoted a large number of products (27.7% of the proprietary drugs) and advertised intensively (33% of all advertising slots), the other large drug-exporting countries (Germany, the UK and Italy) were under-represented.

As almost all the companies which published advertisements in the African journals studied gave French addresses, the differences between their advertisements and the corresponding official French data sheets must be questioned. In this context, the proportion of advertisements with full and accurate information was very low (29.1%). Nevertheless, our results suggest that the situation is probably even worse in Sri Lanka where only 18 of 111 advertisements studied in a previous survey<sup>3</sup> gave full information on generic name, indications, dosage, adverse effects and contraindications. Another survey conducted in the United States<sup>4</sup> showed that 44% of advertisements published in leading medical journals would lead to improper prescribing



The six journals in the study

if a physician had no information about the drug other than that contained in the advertisement. This is all the more serious in the case of Africa since promotional material is often the only source of information for prescribers; our survey revealed for instance that 59.6% of advertisements contained inaccurate information on indication, side effect or contraindication.

It is noteworthy that the most liberal interpretation of the IFPMA code, which only considers whether information is included, not its quality, was not respected in 19 advertisements (13.5%). This confirms the previously reported lack of effectiveness of the IFPMA code<sup>5</sup>.

The journals aimed at paramedical personnel (*Infirmiers* and *Sages Femmes*)

**FORMULAIRE DE MÉDICAMENTS ESSENTIELS**  
pour  
**Les infirmiers et infirmières d'Afrique.**



Première Édition (1987)

Éditeur: GEEP  
(Groupe d'Études Épidémiologiques et Prophylactiques)  
Centre Hospitalier - VILLENEUVE-ST-GEORGES - 94190 FRANCE

Even when promotion meets high ethical standards, prescribers and other health workers need independent sources of drug information, like this GEEP publication

speaking developing countries, we conducted such a study.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

In 1990, we analysed all the drug advertising slots which appeared in six medical and paramedical journals in French-speaking Africa (West Africa and Maghreb): *Sages Femmes*, *Infirmiers*, *Afrique Médicale*, *Médecine d'Afrique Noire*, *Afrique Médecine et Santé*, and *Médecine Digest* (the last was only studied for six months). "Advertisement" is taken to mean the visual and written message and "slot" each individual publication of this message. We first analysed the distribution of advertising slots according to the proprietary drug, active ingredient (and whether or not it was included in the sixth WHO List of Essential Drugs), therapeutic class, manufacturer and country of origin.

We then analysed the content of the advertisements themselves, i.e. the presence or absence of the company's name and address, the generic name of the drug, its indications, contraindications, dosage, side effects and, finally, a state-

### RESULTS

#### Distribution of advertising slots

A total of 1,131 advertising slots appeared on the 3,154 pages published in 1990 by the six journals. They concerned 141 proprietary drugs, 106 of which contained a single active ingredient (for a total of 94 active ingredients) and 35 of which contained combinations (mean, 4.2 active ingredients).

The drugs belonged to 16 therapeutic classes (infectious diseases and parasitology accounted for 37% of the proprietary drugs and 48% of the advertising slots) and 53 therapeutic sub-classes (antibiotics, the first sub-class, accounted for 16.3% of the proprietary drugs and for 21.8% of the advertising slots). They were produced by 52 companies in eight countries. Thirty five of the proprietary drugs (24.8%), produced by 21 companies, could be classified as essential drugs according to WHO criteria.

#### Content of the advertisements

The company's address is given in 139/141 advertisements (98.5%; 93.5% of which were in France), the generic name of the drug in 125 (88.7%), the indications in 136 (96.4%), the dosage in 123 (87.2%), the side effects in 99 (72.8% of the 136 cases in which they are mentioned in the *Dictionnaire Vidal*) and the contraindications in 97 (76.4% of the 127 cases in which they are mentioned in the *Dictionnaire Vidal*).

The advertisements conformed to French official information on indications in 94/136 cases (69.1%), dosage in 92/123 (74.8%), side effects in 79/99 (79.8%) and contraindications in 78/97 (80.4%).

