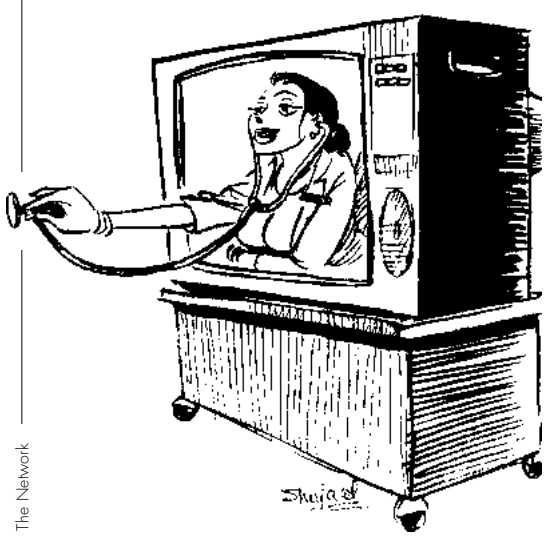
DRUG PROMOTION

believes the European Union and any country must be cautious in changing legislation where there is considerable potential for harm and little if any documented evidence of benefit."

How to optimise drug information

Looking to the future, the WHO representative discussed some of the conclusions of the Bonn meeting with European health authorities, and said that "There are a number of actions to be taken to improve drug information, including:

- operationalising definitions on promotion, advertising and information. There must be more clarity on what constitutes what;
- examining the role of the Internet as a medium for information. While some see the Internet as a problem or threat, it can also provide an opportunity;
- determining what information consumers need: about a disease, about a product, and about comparative information on treatment options. Different people have different needs. It is important for people to know about all of their available options, but we cannot expect companies to provide information on all of the treatment options;
- taking on a more pro-active role for health services in providing information to patients;
- finding ways to use the media as sources of health information."



The Network

"National health authorities need to get the right information out to the public", Mr de Joncheere continued, saying that, "This is often not happening. Problems are often related to the fact that they are not generating enough quality information about medicines or that they are prioritising other things." In conclusion, he referred to discussions at the Bonn meeting on drug promotion, which had emphasised the need for ministries of health and health insurers to have an active policy on rational drug use and consumer information. Mr de Joncheere told delegates in Brussels that there had been calls for governments to address existing gaps in legislation, to collaborate with the mass media in a way that benefits public health, and to raise awareness on the issue among the public and health professionals. In addition, government monitoring of the relationship between health professionals and the industry, and its consequences for rational drug use were also advocated.

Photo: Health Action International

Mr Léon Wever of The Netherlands' Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport addressing the meeting in Brussels

Consumer education vital

Following from the Brussels meeting, the joint organizers, HAI and the European Public Health Alliance, issued a statement recommending to the European Parliament, Council and Commission that the proposal for change was rejected in its current form. This should be done on the grounds that it "does not uphold the Community's Treaty obligation to ensure a high level of public health in all its activities", they said. The consumer groups urged that current legislation should be vigorously enforced, with review, sanctions and thorough monitoring of promotion to health professionals and the public. Finally, they called for the implementation of a strong consumer information and education strategy. The main elements of this strategy would be to improve the quality of patient information leaflets, and to encourage the provision of independent and comparative drug information for health professionals and the public. Developing ways of teaching people the basic principles underlying rational therapies and critical appraisal skills are also vital. ❑

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Reference

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New report on French sales representatives' visits

AFTER 10 years collecting data, *la revue Prescrire's* Representatives Monitoring Network has concluded that medical representatives in France continue to mislead prescribers about drug safety and efficacy. Numerous Government attempts to regulate representatives' visits have done little to remedy the situation, the group says. The Network has involved hundreds of doctors and pharmacists throughout France in completing *Prescrire's* questionnaires that analyse a representative's visit for misleading information. (see *Essential Drugs Monitor* 17 and 24).

Continued vigilance needed

During the period March 2000/2001 the main trends reported by observers concerned more frequent promotion of off-label indications. In total only 68% of indications promoted conformed to the summary of product characteristics, compared to 79% in 1997. Warnings about risks were included in only 10% of cases against 17% the year before. Drug interactions were mentioned in 8% of visits, while in 6% they were denied, and adverse effects were stated in just 10% of cases and denied in 9% (up from 4% the previous year).

During the year representatives were less likely to offer documents on the drugs they were promoting – only 17% of cases. Just a few gave out copies of the statement from France's Transparency Commission that compares a drug with others in the same class. It is a legal requirement for medical representatives to supply this document, which uses a scoring system to assess a drug's benefit and cost-effectiveness. The statement was only used in 2% of cases.

Prescrire's Network believes the findings are particularly alarming given that drug manufacturers say visits by medical representatives remain the most effective way of persuading physicians to prescribe their products. Regulations, industrial ethical codes and international recommendations have had no significant effect so far, according to *la revue Prescrire*, which will continue to monitor the situation. ❑

Source: Prescrire International, vol.10, No.55, October 2001.

FDA reviews its direct-to-consumer advertising policy

DOES direct-to-consumer pharmaceutical advertising confuse patients and does it adversely affect their relationship with their health care providers? These are among the questions that the US Food and Drug Administration is attempting to answer through a review of the effects of direct-to-consumer advertising, reports *Scrip* (4 April 2001). The review was provided for when the Administration first issued guidance on the subject in 1999, and will determine whether the guidance should be changed, rescinded or left as it is.

A growing phenomenon

There has been a great increase in direct-to-consumer advertising – in the first half of 2000 alone it rose by 43% – with the pharmaceutical industry claiming that it "empowers" consumers. But the Food and Drug Administration has criticised several TV advertisements for being misleading or lacking in fair balance. The Administration is conducting two telephone surveys, one of patients and the other of doctors, to obtain their views on both print and broadcasting advertising of medicines. The review is also going to include evaluating published research conducted by other organizations. The FDA is particularly keen to see if such advertising is leading to inappropriate prescribing and to patients getting drugs that they should not be, partly as a result of them pressuring doctors for particular medicines. ❑