

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

DRUG ADVERTISEMENTS IN INDIAN MEDICAL JOURNALS

Sir,

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The pharmaceutical industry, whose primary aim is to maximise the profits, attempts to generate more prescriptions of its products by means of advertisements in various Medical Journals (1). The advertisements are simply more visually arresting and conceptually accessible (2), and their continuous bombardment on the physicians are likely to influence their prescribing habits (2-4). This is because, they are unable to evaluate critically the data of the drug advertisements (5).

Is it that the information in the drug advertisements is unduly profit oriented and not as a source of education to the practitioners? In search of an answer, we analysed the contents of drug advertisements that appeared in various Indian Medical Journals.

A total of 903 drug advertisements appearing in various Indian Medical Journals (CIMS India, MIMS India, J Assoc Physicians Ind, J Ind Med Assoc, J Appl Med, JAMA India, Ind J Pediatrics, The Pediatrics, Ind Practitioner, Ind J Dermatol, Ind J Surg, Ind J Psychiatry, Antiseptic, Ind J Ophthalmol, Ind J Clin Practice, Ind Heart J, Ind J Med Surg, Ind J Obst Gyne, Neurology India) from January 1990 to June 1991 were analysed by using a checklist published by WHO (6), which mention that the advertisements to physicians should contain some definite essential items (Table II).

The profile of field in which the drugs were advertised may depict the interests of the manufacturers in India (Table I). More extensive survey to include all speciality journals may change the values in Table I.

TABLE I : Distribution of the advertisements according to the different systems of body.

Type of drug and sphere of action	n	% of total advertisements*
Infections	211	23.37 (15.17)
Alimentary system	105	11.63 (24.76)
Rheumatic diseases	88	9.75 (56.82)
Cardiovascular system	78	8.64 (15.38)
Nervous system	65	7.20 (15.38)
Skin	65	7.20 (69.23)
Iron and tonics	63	6.98 (100.00)
Respiratory system	51	5.65 (86.27)
Genitourinary system	47	5.20 (53.19)
Minerals and nutritional additives	39	4.32 (87.18)
Ear, nose and throat	22	2.44 (54.54)
Eye	12	1.33 (25.00)
Anti cancer and others	57	6.31 (29.92)
Total	903	

n is the total number of advertisements in each system

*in parenthesis, the proportion of the drug advertisements on drug combinations for each system, are mentioned.

We found that the generic name, brand name, uses of the drug, dosage form, and the address of the pharmaceutical company were mentioned in more than 70% of the drug advertisements. On the other hand, the side effects, precautions or contra-indications, drug interactions, references and the ingredients known to cause problems were mentioned in less than 10% of the drug advertisements (Table II). In 72.34% of the advertisements a considerable space was devoted to the presentation of pictures of one type or the other.

TABLE II : Information contents of the drug advertisements (n=903).

Information	% of the advertisements mentioning it
Name of active ingredients or generic name	83.83
Brand name	100.00
Contents of the active ingredients	62.79
Name of the other ingredients known to cause problems	7.20
Approved therapeutic uses	79.96
Dosage form	72.76
Therapeutic regimen	16.72
Side effects and major adverse reactions	8.86
Precautions, contra-indications and warnings	9.63
Major interactions	2.77
Name of pharmaceutical industry	98.78
Address of the pharmaceutical industry	95.24
References	4.65

A pharmaceutical manufacturer has an opportunity, to proclaim the existence of a drug, promote its advantages and also to provide a useful information to educate the physicians in an advertisement. Unfortunately, our analysis indicated that the drug advertisements that appear in various Indian Medical Journals, give very little information about some vital aspects about the drug, to enable a practitioner to make a decision on prescribing. This is not due to the shortage of space which is primarily used to depict the pictures.

We suggest that the Medical Colleges and the Continuing Medical Education Programmes should include training to the physicians, residents, and medical students, regarding the critical evaluation of the drug advertisements on a more rational basis.

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