

Legal proposal on information to patients ECCG2008 014

To European Commission
Enterprise and Industry Directorate-General
Consumer good / Pharmaceuticals

From The Swedish Consumers' Association

The Swedish Consumers' Association hereby leaves their opinions on the "ECCG2008 014 - Commission public consultation on the key ideas of a legal proposal on information to patients". It is well-known that information on the patients disease makes it easier for the person to deal and live with their disease and treatment, but it is also well-known that the medical companies tend to stretch the identification of the term information. We are positive about finding a regulatory for the whole European Union and it is very important that the Commission listens to what the consumers say in this issue. We hereby give our points of view on this proposal.

The patients are now more strong and active than ever concerning their medical treatment, but there is still a lot left to desire. We have an alarming future ahead of us unless we start acting now and we are glad to see that the European Commission is taking action in this issue. The countries do have different situations concerning medical treatment, system and products. Not all consumers in every member countries have an access to computers, which makes it a little bit more complicated.

We support the proposal in general since this medical information is lifesaving to some patients. But it is also relevant to see how other countries handle the advertising and information on prescription-only medicine.

Identify the framework

What do we mean with the word information, commercials and advertisements? What is the difference between them? For us the information is an objective, understandable, concrete and sustainable information that gives the patient more knowledge. Commercials and

advertisements give the product more selling qualifications and embellish it and its possible uses. The demarcation between these two definitions is not always so clear. Therefore it is very important to identify these already in the beginning what the framework really contains. We do realize that it might be difficult, but the medical industry will try and push it as much as possible. A couple of years ago Glaxo Smith Kline had big advertisements for the asthma medicine Diskus. People in Stockholm saw huge ads in the subway in Stockholm going to work. This medicine sells over the counter. The ads contained pictures of the inhalator with the text “The most used inhalator for asthma in the world”. The argument from the company was that the campaign wasn’t pushing the medicine but only the package. One of the main purposes with this campaign was to see how much you can promote a product until it gets illegal. The Swedish Association of the Pharmaceutical Industry monitors the market and said that the Diskus is an inhalator but it is only sold with medicine. They said that it was against their policy to promote only the inhalator. We hope that the framework in this “Legal proposal on information to patients” is clearly identified from the beginning, so that there will be no mistakes in the future.

The situation in Sweden

In Sweden it is illegal to promote medicine that sells over the counter and we think that we are not really like other countries when it comes to information to patients. Nevertheless there are still things to worry about in Sweden. The Swedish Association of the Pharmaceutical Industry is doing a good job in controlling the information. They have ethical rules for the Pharmaceutical Industries and if you break these you will have a fine that is very expensive, both in money and reputation.

The use of medicals in Sweden

In Sweden the use of medicine has increased enormously over the last years. In Gothenburg the use of psychotropic drugs has increased by 40 percent between the years 2003-2006. For 20 years ago troublesome children got extra attention in school with smaller classes, special education and extra teachers. Today they get a diagnosis as autism or similar diseases and are given medical treatment. Another example is the national pharmacy in Sweden. They had a campaign about six months ago saying that more than half a million Swedish people are in pain in vain. They say that if you go to the pharmacy you will get professional information and they will guide you to the right pain-killer. The doctors had a strong reaction on this because we already eat too much pills in Sweden and this will only encourage people to eat even more. So the pharmacy is another part to take into consideration when talking about medical information.

Alarming examples

In Europe 89 new medicines were introduced between 1995-1999, and the costs for the research were 11,45 million euro. Between the years 2000 and 2004 only 57 medicines were introduced but the costs were 21,5 billion euro. The reason why is that the research and the try-outs are much more complicated and extensive.

In America the pharmaceutical companies are allowed to promote this medicine and they spend huge amount of money on commercials. Statistics from a survey shows that they sell medicine for 234.5 million dollars and out of these they spend 13 percent on science and 24 percent on commercials. The costs cover free samples, advertisements, exhibitions and sellers. (yelah.net 080107).

As you can see in the film "Big bucks, big pharma" the medical information on TV in the United States is very scary. You find that every disease is treatable, with a pill. Even the so-called "life-style-diseases" are able to cure. There is an expression that says "An ill for every pill" and after looking at the film, you start asking yourself "How do I really feel? Don't I also have tics in my legs? A little bit moody and maybe sad? We start questioning our lives and normal situation and this is very scary, because this is the purpose and the reason why the pharmaceutical companies promote their medicine so successfully in America.

Just looking at the United States is an example of how we don't want it to become in Europe. This is s future we will try to avoid by all means!

Make the information understandable

Since the patient information leaflets that come with the medicine are produced by the industry they are written in a language hard to understand for a normal consumer. These leaflets should be "washed" by a part that stands outside the industry to make sure the information is understandable and relevant. Maybe the Medical Products Agency in each country is a good part?

It is also difficult to read the information leaflets for some consumers, especially those who are blind and partially sighted. It is important that all the patients are able to take part of the information and The Swedish Consumers' Association suggest that this is made possible.

Put focus on the public relation

Nevertheless there are still things to worry about in Sweden. We have problems with the hidden information, which is very hard to proof, but still is very common. Almost every day you meet news with big headlines with a new successful medicine. This headline is combined with a patient that has been through a success story and talks about it very open. The person

had big problems with the disease but after taking the pills he or she had a remarkable change and got well after years in pain. Or “Now I can sleep with a new treatment” saying a private person. These headlines are the result of lobbyists and consultants working with public relations trying to have an impact on the Swedish people. And it works! This hidden information could be more harmful for the public than the controlled ones.

We do hope this document can give you some more information about the way The Swedish Consumers´ Association think in this subject. You are more than welcome to return to us if you have more questions.

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Louise Ekström
Communication Officer
Box 6086
SE- 102 32 STOCKHOLM
Sweden

Telephone: +46 8 674 43 00

Direct: +46 8 674 43 06

Telefax: +46 8 674 43 29

Mobile: +46 70 202 85 86