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Maine Voices: Doctors and patients don't have to rely on TV for drug information

Physicians have better sources than salesmen and advertisements to guide prescribing choices.

MA Opinion

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By JENNIFER RECK

HALLOWELL — Pharmaceutical manufacturers reported spending \$90.6 million on marketing prescription drugs in Maine in 2008, according to a report by Maine's Department of Health and Human Services.

That represents an increase of 33 percent over the \$68 million spent in 2007. Though pharmaceutical marketing expenditures are increasing, a recent report by the market intelligence firm Access Monitor reveals that in 2009 the number of doctors willing to see most pharmaceutical sales representatives fell by 20 percent, and the number who would see no "reps" at all increased by 50 percent.

The data reflect an ongoing trend among doctors to limit pharmaceutical representatives' access to their practices. Physicians are saying "no" to industry marketing and "yes" to independent sources of information on prescription drugs.

As this shift away from information provided by sales representatives is taking place, where can doctors turn for reliable, unbiased information?

One new option is the Maine Independent Clinical Information Service, also known as MICIS. This program was launched last summer and is administered by the Maine Medical Association on behalf of the state.

The educational materials are produced by independent clinical experts from Harvard Medical School with no commercial ties to the pharmaceutical industry. They perform exhaustive reviews of the evidence to provide the information your doctor needs to help make the best drug choices for you.

To date, the program has reached approximately 350 Maine prescribers through outreach visits to discuss educational modules on type 2 diabetes and anti-platelet therapy. Survey responses to these modules have been very positive.

Ninety-eight percent of participants rated the service as excellent or good. Physicians who have already received a visit from one of MICIS's so-called "academic detailers" are asking when they will be back with more information on other topics.

One important topic MICIS is planning to address is antipsychotic prescriptions for children, an area plagued with clinically inappropriate use despite serious metabolic side effects that can cause significant weight gain and predispose patients to diabetes.

A recent survey revealed that physicians could identify the FDA-approved uses of various antipsychotics only about half the time. Their uncertainty about the approved uses of these drugs can be attributed to campaigns by pharmaceutical companies to market them for unapproved uses.

A wave of legal settlements has revealed the unlawful means pharmaceutical companies have used to market their products for unapproved uses, including Eli Lilly's unlawful marketing of the antipsychotic Zyprexa for unapproved uses in children and the elderly. The company was fined \$1.4 billion for these violations. Though this may sound like a large fine, it pales in comparison to the estimated \$20 billion that Eli Lilly has made from unapproved uses of Zyprexa.

The case for independent sources of information on prescription drugs is clear: it is in the best interest of patients to make sure their needs, rather than commercial interests, are dictating which drugs they get.

Consumers can get involved too and take advantage of independent information on prescription drugs provided by the nonprofit Consumers Union, publisher of the popular Consumer Reports magazine. Their freely accessible website, Consumer Reports Health Best Buy Drugs (www.crbestbuydrugs.org), compares the safety, efficacy and costs of commonly used drugs.

This information provides a better starting point for a conversation with your doctor about prescription drugs than an ad seen on TV. If you are intrigued by an ad though, before you ask your doctor, check this website for its AdWatch video series to learn about the important information these ads leave out.

Doctors and patients are making important changes to the practice of medicine when they turn to independent sources for information on prescription drugs such as MICIS and Consumer Reports Health Best Buy Drugs.

Join the trend by looking for independent information and make sure you are getting the best drug for you at the best price.

- Special to the Press Herald

http://www.pressherald.com/opinion/doctors-and-patients-dont-have-to-rely-on-tv-for-drug-information_2010-08-31.html