

Parish Nurse Corner

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DRUG ADS - THE DEBATE

Ads abound on TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines promoting prescription drugs for everything!

This phenomenon of pharmaceutical companies--called direct-to-consumer (DTC) advertising--has been around since the early 1980's. But it has only recently taken off.

However, are drug ads benefiting consumers? Many physicians and managed care think DTC advertising disrupts the patient-physician relationship by creating pressure on the doctors to prescribe certain medications, and to defend themselves if they don't. Some believe that drug prices are being driven up. Many are concerned about the misleading nature of some ads.

On the flip side, advocates argue that DTC advertising creates better awareness of disease symptoms and treatment, lessens the stigma of certain conditions. It may also save lives with information about drug side effects and interactions.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) demand that DTC prescription ads contain a "brief summary": drug's side effects, contraindications, and effectiveness. Additionally, every ad must present a fair balance between a drug's effectiveness and its risk, as well as not being false or misleading.

However, the requirements for TV and radio ads differ from print ads. The broadcast ads must contain a product's most important risk related information with "adequate provision" for supplying the full summary. As a result, a toll-free number or reference to print ads are given to consumers. Omission of such information may lead to overestimating a drug's benefit.

The FDA has recently reprimanded several drug companies for ads that overstate benefits while minimizing risks of a drug, suggest their product is superior to a competitor's - without proof; and for promoting drugs for "unapproved" indications.

DTC advertising is probably here to stay. Interpret it wisely! Keep in mind all drugs have a cost in side effects and dollars, and most ads downplay each.

Help us, God, to maintain a healthy skepticism toward medical approaches regarding our health.

God's Blessings,
Peggy Taylor, RN
Parish Nurse

