FDA Surveys Shed New Light on How Patients & Physicians View DTC Advertising of Prescription Drugs

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Massive direct to consumer (DTC) advertising of prescription drugs has fueled demand for certain drugs. DTCA has driven consumer demand for drugs such as Viagra for erectile dysfunction, Xenical and Meridia for obesity, and Propecia for male pattern baldness. These “lifestyle” drugs rank in the top 12 for promotional expenditures. 1

Before 1980, pharmaceutical companies usually limited promotion of prescription drugs to physicians and other health care professionals. 2 DTC advertising began in the early 1980s, but was subject to an FDA moratorium on the practice set forth in a September 2, 1983 policy statement. 3 The moratorium was lifted in September 1985 based the FDA’s finding that then-current regulations governing prescription drug advertising provided sufficient safeguards to protect consumers. 4

Critics of DTC advertising argue that drug companies are inappropriately creating demand for new prescription drugs, in some cases causing patients to ask their physicians for newer, more-expensive drugs where less expensive drugs are perfectly adequate. 5 However, DTC advertising may provide consumers with important information about medical conditions, make them aware of treatment options, and facilitate dialogue between physicians and their patients. 6 Historically, organized medicine has not supported DTC advertising. The American Medical Association “has been, and continues to be, concerned about the possible negative impact of DTC [advertising] on the physician-patient relationship and its impact on the already spiraling increase in prescription drug costs.” 7

Until recently, little data was available on how physicians and patients view DTC advertising and how such advertising affects the physician-patient relationship. On

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3 Id.
4 Id.
5 See NIHCM at p. 2.
6 Id.
November 19, 2004, the FDA released results of three surveys of patient and physician attitudes and behaviors associated with DTC advertising of prescription drugs.  

*Patient Surveys*

The FDA conducted national surveys of patients in 1999 and 2002 to assess the effect of DTC advertising on the physician-patient relationship.  

Patients were asked about their awareness of DTC advertising, the way in which they seek more information or ask questions about advertised drugs, their opinions of such advertising, and other ways that DTC advertising affects the physician-patient relationship.  

Unless otherwise noted, all data mentioned below is from the 2002 survey.

A large majority of patients (81%) reported seeing broadcast or print advertisements in 2002, up from 72% in 1999, but very few patients (4%) initiated a visit to their doctor because of DTC advertising.  

However, one-third of the respondents reported that DTC advertising had caused them to ask their doctor questions.  

Over 90% of patients reported that their doctors willing answered their questions.  

Some physicians have been concerned that many patients will seek prescriptions for a particular drug because of DTC advertising, and will be overly disappointed if they do not receive the prescription.  

The surveys found that patients generally expect prescriptions because they are sick, not because of DTC advertisements.  

Only 6% expected to receive a drug based on television advertising, and only 5% because of print advertising.  

Doctors generally did prescribe drugs requested by patients.  

About half of the patients received the requested drug, one third received a different prescription drug, and 42% were advised to changed their diet or behavior.

DTC ads can influence the physician-patient relationship, but a large majority of patients (73%) felt that DTC advertising does not diminish the role of physicians in choosing appropriate drugs.  

In fact, many (43%) felt the ads generate better questions and discussion with their doctors.  

Some patients (10%) were reluctant to ask their doctor questions about advertised drugs believing such questions would indicate the patient did not trust his doctor.

Consumers are beginning to negatively react to the saturation of DTC ads.  

The number of patients who reported that they “like seeing” DTC ads declined from 52% in 1999 to 32% in 2002.  

Not surprisingly, patients had trouble reading and understanding the so-

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9 *Id.*

10 *Id.*

11 *Id.* at p. 2.

12 *Id.* at p. 3.

13 *Id.*

14 *Id.*

15 *Id.* at p. 4.

16 *Id.*
called “brief summary” information about drugs since the brief summary is typically a reprint of the complex drug labeling provided to health care professionals. In spite of these difficulties, 45% of patients read most or all of the brief summary for drugs in which they were interested. 17

**Physician Survey**

The 2002 physician survey questioned office-based primary care physicians and specialists about the frequency of questions received regarding advertised drugs, their responses to patient questions, prescribing behaviors, and general opinions about DTC advertising. 18

Physicians were asked questions regarding a recent encounter where a patient asked about an advertised drug, and to relate benefits and problems caused by patient exposure to the ad. Forty-one percent of physicians reported that patient exposure to DTC ads provides several benefits. DTC exposure helps inform and educate patients, allows better physician-patient discussions, and gives patients a better awareness of various treatment options. 19 Some physicians (18%) reported problems related to patient DTC advertising exposure. These physicians had to deal with requests for inappropriate and/or unnecessary drugs and take time to correct misconceptions. 20

Physicians reported that patients frequently asked whether a prescription drug was available to treat their condition (86% recalled such a request), and patients less frequently requested a drug by name (65% of primary care physicians and 52% of specialists recalled such a request). 21 A majority of primary care physicians (64%) reported prescribing the requested drug, but less of that half of the specialists (46%) were likely to prescribe the requested drug. 22 Physicians who denied prescribing a requested brand name drug reported several reasons for their denial. All physicians reported that the requested drug was not the most appropriate choice for the patient, and primary care physicians would sometimes refuse to prescribe a particular drug because more cost-effective alternative drugs were available. 23 Primary care physicians were also more likely than specialists to feel “somewhat” or “very” pressured to prescribe a drug (22%) than specialists (13%).

A minority of physicians (38%) believes DTC advertising causes patients to question their diagnosis and a smaller group (28%) believes such advertising “led to tension” in the physician-patient relationship. 24 Physicians overall impressions of DTC advertising’s effect on their patients and practice were divided. About one-third of physicians felt it

17 Id.
18 Id. at p. 5.
19 Id. at p. 5.
20 Id. at p. 6.
21 Id. at p. 6..
22 Id.
23 Id.
24 Id. at p. 7.
had a positive effect, one-third reported an overall negative effect, and one-third reported no effect at all.\textsuperscript{25}

From the surveys, it is clear that DTC advertising provides benefits by encouraging patients to seek information about drugs or conditions from their physicians and ask their physicians better questions.\textsuperscript{26} However, DTC advertising does sometimes make physicians feel pressured to prescribe a particular drug, can make patients question a physician’s diagnosis, and may cause tension in the physician-patient relationship. On balance, it seems that physicians (and their patients) have handled the issues created by DTC advertising very well.

\textsuperscript{25} Id.
\textsuperscript{26} Id.