

The Pharmaceutical Industry Shouldn't Advertise

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Summary

The pharmaceutical industry spends and gains millions of dollars annually, because it advertises its products, namely medications. However, this practice – of advertising prescription drugs – is currently illegal in every country but two: New Zealand and the United States. This practice should be illegal in every country, because it is unethical.

The solution to the problem is to quit advertising for the pharma industry – at least on television. It is an outdated and impure practice, of which only two nations still take part. The pharma industry must improve the quality of its products, before advertising drugs that are potentially dangerous. Additionally, physicians should provide more drug options to patients.

Background

Every day the general public sees advertisements, in print and on television, promoting medications which treat depression, psoriasis, chronic dry eye, erectile dysfunction and many other conditions. Each ad makes the process of treating these problems seem so simple. There may be a problem which is affecting someone's life significantly, and the drug is supposed to make everything better. In most cases, the drugs work. But, the side effects that come after taking these can significantly change someone's life and make things even worse for them. In advertisements, these negative side effects are glossed over.

If the pharma industry isn't willing to provide sufficient information and clarity on drug side effects, how can it be trusted at all? It is enough of a problem already for people to feel the need to take certain drugs that aren't working – but, to experience even more problems after doing so doesn't make much sense and is wrong (2016, September 12).

People should not be deceived into buying drugs that could be more harm than good. Doctors know what is best for their patients and will tell them. Advertisers shouldn't be telling people what drugs to use, especially if what they are getting is much more expensive.

Advertising shouldn't be used to promote products or services that have the potential to cause serious health issues. There are too many negative side effects for the drugs we see on television, billboards and in print to be promoted on such a large scale (2010, January 05).

Most advertisements for prescriptions drugs don't do an adequate job in declaring all of the side effects, even if being narrated or shown in text. These are either spoken too fast or are shown in fine print, and in either case, most people will not hear or see each effect.

And when it comes to lack of efficacy, annual spending by drug companies on television advertisements reached more than \$3 billion in 2005. Today, in 2017, this figure has grown to more than \$5 billion annually. This money could be spent elsewhere, on more important things – such as medical research for cures and treatments. This would be effective (Lazarus).

Increasingly, pharmaceutical companies are pushing drugs out to the public that are doing more harm than good. Many drugs seem too dangerous to take because of the long lists of negative side effects (Put Us To Sleep, n.d.).

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The main thing is advertisers and drug companies are collaborating and contributing to a broken and immoral practice. Many of the well-known and highly-promoted drugs have side effects which don't make the prescription worth the time, effort or harm.

If someone needs a specific drug, their doctor can inform them about it. The industry doesn't need advertising, as the world is accustomed to. A doctor can promote both healthy diets and lifestyles, but sometimes those practices are not enough for particular health issues. Doctors must prescribe drugs, at times, for their patients (Stop Promoting Drugs, n.d.). So why advertise drugs?

Doctors are paid to promote drugs in their offices– and they do this job well (2015, January 09). So why does the pharma industry still feel the need to use advertising? The best form of advertising is by word-of-mouth and a message coming from a licensed physician would bare a lot of weight to someone in need of serious help. Pharmaceutical companies should focus their budgets on matters of greater importance, and doctors can educate their patients about drugs that might be helpful.

Additionally, the drugs seen on television and in magazines currently are expensive versions. The inexpensive drugs aren't getting exposure, and many people are paying more than they should – especially because the less-costly drugs work just as well. Pharma advertising has increased, which means the costs to keep it going have as well (2015, November 17). The cost of drugs will go up accordingly. Many people have serious illnesses and need the right medications to treat or overcome those conditions. Why add on unnecessary costs for overpriced prescriptions?

Relevance

Maricich is a healthcare marketing agency. Its sole purpose is to market and brand healthcare companies – namely pharmaceutical companies. Maricich's entire business is built on promoting the healthcare sector, but the pharma industry doesn't need to be included. There are hospitals, non-profit organizations and research companies that need assistance with advertising. It may not seem like it, but a lot of people are being negatively affected by pharmaceutical advertising.

For example, many people in the world have multiple sclerosis (M.S.), and have dealt with it for most of their lives. Because of the severity of this condition, many different prescription drugs are required to treat it. Most people with M.S. go from one drug to another because they haven't found one that works, and the side effects are too dangerous to continue.

This presents a serious problem when it comes to advertising. Some commercials and print advertisements promote drugs to counteract certain symptoms that stem from M.S. People who deal with the conditions of M.S. daily may see these ads and inquire to learn more. But, they may have missed the list of side effects. This list is usually long, and includes other serious issues that will come if a drug is consumed. However, if a patient has the symptoms required, a doctor will prescribe the matching drug.

This is a frustrating process that exists in the healthcare industry. A person has a condition, sees the ad to treat that condition, and talks to their doctor about it. They will most likely leave the

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doctor's office with a prescription for the drug they inquired about. This drug could have a lot of side effects that they weren't aware of, and ones that they certainly aren't willing to experience.

Why do pharmaceutical companies still feel the need to advertise drugs that aren't working? These companies should take a step back and think for a bit. Why not stop promoting drugs and start producing better ones?

Such a solution could take a while, however. The people within it are obviously doing something right because it is a highly successful market. The pharma industry hasn't always been on the ethically-sound side of the line. Certain drugs are prescribed all the time for uses that aren't approved by the FDA, and it may be legal by government standards. But, ethical and legal are not the same thing.

Now, the FDA is considering giving drug companies the green light to advertise drugs for uses that are not approved. Ellen Kunes of Consumer Reports was quoted saying, "People who get a prescription from their doctor for a drug that's not approved to treat their condition may be at a higher risk of side effects and other serious problems." (Simon, C. R.)

The pharma industry needs to be kept in check. The general population wants drugs ads off television, and in a related tone, many don't want drugs to be approved at a faster rate (2016, May 12).

Existing Guidelines

Per current advertising guidelines – or, the American Advertising Federation's ethics – the pharmaceutical industry should strive to gain a better understanding of these codes. The industry isn't maintaining high ethical standards, and it isn't disclosing and disseminating information properly, or in full, as it should be (Advertising Ethics, n.d.).

If the industry were to begin holding to these standards, it would be able to clean up its poor reputation.

Solution

Most people watch drug advertisements on TV because they were already engaged in their regular programs, and the commercials – which the world is accustomed to – come on in between most shows. But, most people aren't concentrating on all aspects of the ads. Because of this, the solution would be to reduce drug advertising down to print and online publications, where someone's attention might be a bit more focused.

Pharmaceutical companies need to develop better products that are not as harmful. In other words, there should be a ban against direct-to-consumer advertising on television, because it is too effective in promoting products that cause too much damage. This is already picking up speed among many groups. In 2011, an article from the *American Journal of Law & Medicine* came out about how this could be possible – and why it is necessary (American Journal, 2011).

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Additionally, doctors and pharmaceutical companies need to understand the overall goal, which is to help people who are sick and ill, and to bring health and wellness to the public. These goals cannot be reached if prescription drugs are dangerous and expensive.

Illustrative Example

Sweden is a great example of self-regulation regarding its pharma industry. The United States – and New Zealand, for that matter – could take notes on the Scandinavian nation's experience in this area. Antidepressant advertising in Sweden has shown that there are both strengths and weaknesses in the self-regulatory process. The country has done many things right, but nothing is perfect. 34 percent of all of Sweden's drug advertisements have violated the industry's code (May 2013). Why mess around with something so delicate?

It is also key to remember that every nation across the world, but two, have already vowed not to use direct-to-consumer advertising for the pharma industry. If the U.S. and New Zealand can make the same vow, it will most likely end up in each nation's favor in the long run.

Conclusion

Maricich, and other advertisers, need to know the limits when advertising for their clients. There is something about TV commercials that speak volumes to audiences, in which certain things cannot be avoided. When the product or service being promoted is proven to be imperfect and dangerous, the agency in charge of creating the advertising should draw the line.

The pharmaceutical industry is in danger by advertising its drug products. The fact that only two countries still use direct-to-consumer advertising to promote pharma products should say everything about the ethicality of this practice. Why would we as consumers, as well as the pharma industry, both be so foolish as to mess with something so wrong?

Drug advertising is unethical and unnecessary – and it's time to put an end to this practice. When filming a TV commercial or designing a print ad for a drug, it should speak volumes about how ethical this is, especially if a list of other potential problems must be included in the script or the copy.

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