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Cherry-picking

The European Parliament is once again debating whether to allow direct-to-consumer advertising of prescription drugs. One specific issue is whether advertisers should be able to cherry-pick selected information from the summary of product characteristics (SPC).

If this measure had been approved a few years ago, advertisers might have made the following claims for Vioxx[®] (*rofecoxib*), by citing sentences cherry-picked from the SPC available on the website of the French Health Products Safety Agency (www.afssaps.fr) on 1 August 2010 (our translation):

“(...) after one week of treatment, (...) rofecoxib led to a significant reduction in pain in patients with osteoarthritis (...)”

“Multiple doses up to 250 mg/day for 14 days had no significant toxicity (...)”

“Among patients with osteoarthritis, the percentage of patients with gastroduodenal ulcers

detected by endoscopy was similar in the placebo and rofecoxib groups (...)”

“Very rare [adverse effects]: palpitations, myocardial infarction, pulmonary oedema (...) stroke, hypertensive episodes (...)”

Effective, with “no significant toxicity”? Consumers might have been surprised to learn that this drug was withdrawn from the market in 2004 after tens of thousands of patients suffered cardiovascular events in the United States alone (see *Prescrire International* 77 on pages 115-117).

Information in the SPCs should be taken into consideration in its entirety, not piecemeal, and always with a critical mind.

Patients need objective and well-balanced information, not dangerously biased “promotional messages”.

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