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Drug companies and patient groups: who benefits?

A number of articles, books, conferences and market research consultants have confirmed that pharmaceutical companies are now focusing their long-term marketing strategies on patients and patient groups (1).

Pharmaceutical companies are in fact seeking to define a new “business model”, at a time when their hopes of introducing new, highly profitable drugs are dwindling. And when increasing numbers of countries, even wealthy nations, are reluctant to pay exorbitant prices for drugs that provide no tangible therapeutic advance.

Patients “empowered” by drug companies... Pharmaceutical companies intend to play a greater role in “informing” patients about diseases, but also about their drugs. And they have not abandoned their plan of “helping” patients to comply with their treatment: “the LEEM [the organisation that represents the pharmaceutical industry in France] wants to contribute to the empowerment of patients and to promote more responsible medicine use” (2). For example, Sanofi-Aventis is cultivating partnerships with French universities to “create professions related to health behaviours and therapeutic patient education. (...) Here again, it is a means of retraining [Editor’s note: drug reps] and looking ahead” (3).

Manipulation of patient groups? Certain patient groups are being given a key role to play in the marketing strategy of drug companies. Drug companies are using them in order to obtain faster marketing approval

for new drugs from regulatory agencies, as well as accelerated agreements on high drug prices or a higher level of reimbursement (4). When pharmaceutical companies state that “*patient groups must be heard and have a greater role in the healthcare management system*”, it is out of self-interest (2).

It is in the interest of patients and their advocacy groups to question the reliability of the information provided by drug companies. They must also take into account how accepting funding from the pharmaceutical industry will affect their credibility.

The commercial ambitions of drug companies have led them to put patients at the centre of their commercial strategy. But there is no reason patients should let themselves be manipulated.

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Selected references from Prescrire’s literature search.

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- 3- “Chez Sanofi-Aventis, les visiteurs médicaux à la croisée des chemins” *Dépêche Destination Santé* du 30 octobre 2008: 1 page.
- 4- Laurance J “Drug firms bankroll attacks on NHS. Special investigation: Charities’ protests against Nice funded by pharmaceutical companies”. www.independent.co.uk accessed 26 November 2008: 2 pages.

