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Classics

The “hot new book that everyone is talking about” is sometimes no match for classics that have stood the test of time, but booksellers are able to sell more copies of this book. They are therefore tempted to give it pride of place in their shop windows and on their display stands.

Medicines, another creation of the human mind, have also had some undeniable and lasting successes, and some have, over time, proved to be essential, dependable “classics”. But drugs, being industrial products, frequently have the same short-lived success as a best-selling book: market forces dictate that the new takes the place of the old.

Indeed it is by replacing the old with the new and by creating new needs that business is done: the sale of new products drives economic growth. Occasionally, these new products offer genuine progress, but often just empty buzz, and in some cases, they represent a step backwards.

Healthcare professionals are confronted with this powerful dynamic. Powerful because marketing has lent it highly effective means of persuasion and coercion. Powerful, also because it taps into deep-seated psychological drives: the desire to be at the forefront, to embrace progress, to change one’s habits, to relieve the boredom of always doing the same thing, and to be seen as keeping abreast of the latest developments.

Certain key opinion leaders in the medical field are like certain literary critics: they see no harm in heaping praise on the latest in-thing, because that’s what makes the news. And some healthcare professionals see nothing wrong with prescribing and dispensing a new drug in the same way that booksellers put the latest book that everyone is talking about in their shop windows.

There are, however, booksellers who know how to recommend not only the world’s most critically-acclaimed authors of the day, but also the great authors of the past. And not all healthcare professionals allow themselves to be carried away by Big Pharma’s marketing machine, which tears down today what it praised to the skies yesterday. Many healthcare professionals choose to be their patients’ informed advisors, preferring drugs that have proved their worth: the “classics” of yesterday and today.

It is in patients’ interests that we keep a cool head when confronted with pharmaceutical hype and fads. We must learn to sort the wheat from the chaff, to identify the classics of the past and of today. Many will be the classics of tomorrow.

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