

Direct-to-consumer advertising: the European Commission's plan



● Freedom of disinformation.

Once again, the European Commission is pursuing its plans to allow pharmaceutical companies to advertise prescription drugs directly to the public (1,2).

Obsession. In 2002, European deputies overwhelmingly rejected plans by the European Commission's Enterprise Directorate to legalise direct-to-consumer advertising of prescription drugs (1). The Commission simply obtained a mandate to make proposals intended to improve public access to high-quality health information. Yet, in 2007, the Commission again proposed to allow direct-to-consumer advertising (1).

The European Commission has virtually ignored criticisms made during the public consultation on its proposal. It is now citing patients' right to information in support of its draft Directive (2). Drug

companies insist they are not seeking to lift the ban on direct-to-public advertising of prescription drugs, but claim it is their "duty" to convey information on their products to the public that only they possess (a).

Already too much drug advertising. In Europe, drug companies already have a great deal of access to the public, through their right to publish information on health disorders, to sponsor audiovisual programmes, to promote their drugs through journalists in the lay media, and to be involved in the information made available to patients in doctors' waiting rooms and community pharmacies.

Drug companies are also present on the Internet, sometimes turning up in unexpected places. To cite one source (our translation from the French): "(...) *For the moment, in view of current legislation, drug companies are restricting themselves to a discreet presence on blogs, through agencies specialising in buzz marketing* (...) " (3).

Thus, drug companies are already engaging in direct-to-consumer advertising for prescription drugs through all available media, and are simply seeking the right to increase their promotional activities, with fewer restrictions.

European deputies and ministers of European member states will examine this draft Directive in 2010. Let's persuade them to place further restraints on drug companies' advertising activities rather than giving them free rein.

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1- Prescrire Rédaction "Information-patient: la clé du marché" *Rev Prescrire* 2007; 27 (285): 545.

2- "Commissioner makes final plea for drug information directive" 2 September 2009. www.euractiv.com accessed 21 October 2009 : 3 pages.

3- Postel B "Industrie pharmaceutique - Quelles informations pour les patients ?" *Pharmaceutiques* mars 2009 ; 33.