Three years later, the ‘Pharmaceutical Forum’: a new masquerade

In late 2005 the European Commission replaced the G10 by a new group called the ‘Pharmaceutical Forum’ ("a high-level political platform", no less…) in order to continue “discussions” on three themes of the ex-G10, including drug information for patients (a).

Secrecy. This ‘forum’, far larger than the ex-G10, includes two European commissioners (Enterprise and Industry, plus Health and Consumer Protection), as well as member state ministers, 3 representatives of the European Parliament, representatives of 5 European pharmaceutical industry federations, and representatives of healthcare professionals, patients, and health insurers.

However, the full list of participants in the ‘Pharmaceutical Forum’ has never been made public, nor have the selection criteria, the forum’s working methods, nor the management of conflicts of interest. Reports made by several participants suggest that several dozen people travel to Brussels to participate in each of the three working groups, including the one on patient information.

Read and pass along the joint declaration

The joint declaration by Health Action International (HAI) Europe, the International Society of Drug Bulletins (ISDB), the Association Internationale de la Mutualité (AIM), the European consumers’ organisation (BEUC) and the Medicines in Europe Forum, published on 3 October 2006, is available in French at www.prescrire.org (9 pages) and in English at www.isdbweb.org (8 pages). It was also included with the December 2006 issue of Prescrire International.

Untruths. On 29 September 2006, at the first meeting of the ‘Pharmaceutical Forum’ (convened after preliminary work), a speech by the European Enterprise Commissioner nevertheless clearly stated its objectives (10). According to the Commissioner, the status of health information in Europe is “unsatisfactory, and even unacceptable”. He described access to information as inadequate for those with no internet access and for non-English speakers. Access to ‘information’ should therefore be improved, and efforts should be made to “create confidence of citizens and health professionals in the quality of any information provided by industry”.

The Commissioner described the pharmaceutical industry as the source of ‘information’, having the “knowledge, skills and resources…” necessary to provide it (b)(10). The Commissioner responsible for Health and Consumer Protection declared that “Industry can help to provide information that is trusted. It wants to be able to play a legitimate role in communication about its own products.” (11).

The Commission regretted that its “last attempt to modernise the legislation failed” (referring to the massive rejection of its 2001 proposal), and announced that in 2007 it would present a report to the Council and to the European Parliament aimed at modifying the framework of patient information (10).

‘Patient representatives’ curiously in line with industry claims

According to the vague description of the ‘Pharmaceutical Forum’ posted on the European Commission’s website, patients are represented by the ‘European Patients’ Forum’.

Big Pharma spokespersons. This organisation, created in 2003, is referred to in the report of a survey published in July 2005 by Health Action International, as “a model of secrecy and conflict of interest” (12). The evidence is overwhelming: this organisation’s activities are funded by drug companies; events are held jointly with organisations representing drug companies; and when the European Patients’ Forum represented patients on the Board of the European Medicines Agency (EMEA), sources of funding were not disclosed (c). Yet the European Commission chooses to give this organisation a central role each time patient information

They also report that the working group’s methods are poorly defined and its objectives unclear. Two flimsy reports released by the committee responsible for leading the “forum”, as well as a very vague interim report, are available on the European Commission’s website, but they contain little concrete information (8,9).

Outlook

The role of pharmaceutical companies in strictly defined because of their inherent conflicts of interest. New measures on treatment choice must be independent both of individual companies and their commercial imperatives, and free from the influence of the industry. This also means that the industry’s self-regulatory measures will not be effective, as they lack transparency, self-imposed standards, and independent enforcement. The Joint Committee of the European Parliament and the Council is currently examining a draft directive on pharmaceutical promotion. The European Commission has already proposed a directive on access to health information for patients (10). There is no reason why members of the ‘Pharmaceutical Forum’ cannot be asked to give their views on this draft directive. This forum also has the opportunity to advise on the measures to be taken to ensure that information on medicines is clear, consistent, and complete. The European Commission has already proposed a directive on access to health information for patients (10). There is no reason why members of the ‘Pharmaceutical Forum’ cannot be asked to give their views on this draft directive. This forum also has the opportunity to advise on the measures to be taken to ensure that information on medicines is clear, consistent, and complete.