

Translated from *Rev Prescrire* October 2008; 28 (300): 721

# Health information

There is strong demand for information on health-related issues among the general public. But this is a sales category in which the worst often rubs shoulders with the best.

*Prescrire's* first aim is to inform healthcare professionals, but *Prescrire* has also long been concerned with the quality of information available to the general public, and more specifically to patients.

Generally speaking, the criteria used to judge the quality of health information available to patients and the general public are the same as those applying to information for healthcare professionals.

This means that the information must deal with the questions in hand, especially those posed by patients and their families, and not avoid the difficult issues such as the natural disease course and prognosis, or the effectiveness and risks of various treatment options. It also means that information should not be dictated by the author's own interests, or by an underlying commercial bent, as is too often the case.

Honest and reliable information. That supposes transparent sources of funding, shielding the editorial choices of subject matter and content from partisan or commercial pres-

ures. It also supposes that authors are not allowed to be both judge and judged.

Information must be balanced and must be backed up by reliable sources (often the same as those used by healthcare professionals), that are explicitly cited by the authors. The different alternatives, and especially available therapeutic options, should be listed and ranked, based on the strength of the evidence, including the likely benefits and risks.

The quality of the evidence supporting the author's claims must be clearly stated. In addition, the information should be dated, and updated if necessary.

It's time to put an end to opinion pieces, partisan arguments, "buzz" campaigns, and fragmentary news reports with no follow-up.

Imprecise, vague, biased, outdated or inconsistent information fosters misunderstanding and distrust between patients and healthcare professionals.

In contrast, sound information, made available to all, assists healthcare professionals in prevention, care and patient education, and contributes to decision-making that is constructively shared between patients and healthcare professionals.

**Prescrire**