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Systematic, in-depth analysis

As a result of the Mediator[®] (*benfluorex*) disaster in France, many people began to realise the extent to which withholding the truth can adversely affect health. It leads to substandard care and distrust of the healthcare system. Healthcare professionals are withholding the truth when they deny or omit mentioning the adverse effects of a drug or the limitations of a diagnosis. Drug regulatory agencies are withholding the truth when they delay the disclosure of important information, base their decisions on advice from biased experts, or shroud their proceedings in secrecy. Public health authorities are withholding the truth when they conceal the limitations of a screening programme, exaggerate the dangers of an epidemic, downplay the adverse effects of a vaccine, or fail to clearly inform health professionals and the public that a drug has more harms than benefits.

Against this background, French society has discovered the importance of whistle-blowers who had to battle against pharmaceutical companies, health authorities and the majority of experts to bring to light a public health problem. This new freedom to speak out has encouraged the emergence of useful “troublemakers”.

But whistle-blowing alone is not sufficient, and an increasing number of people have understood the vital importance of rigorous, in-depth analysis, of the type that *Prescrire* carries out:

– reaching conclusions on the basis of evidence as opposed to conjecture and wishful thinking;

– telling the whole truth to the public and patients who want information: the evidence as well as any uncertainties;

– criticising those who fail to fulfil their role, be they politicians, pharmaceutical companies, health agencies, educators, healthcare professionals, or patient advocacy groups;

– consistently drawing attention to the adverse effects of treatments, in order to better recognise and prevent them;

– not seeking consensus or close ties with other stakeholders in the healthcare system, particularly with its expert advisors and those in authority. Even if it means confrontation.

Over the years, *Prescrire* has systematically gathered and analysed large amounts of data in order to summarise and highlight the information which is useful in healthcare decision-making, first and foremost in the interest of patients. We have extended this approach beyond the healthcare field, as illustrated in this issue by our first review of the effects of human exposure to bisphenol A (see pages 219-223).

In addition to being an everyday resource for healthcare professionals, and supplementing the sometimes trailblazing work of whistle-blowers and troublemakers, *Prescrire* aims to help authorities and other stakeholders make better decisions in the regulation of the pharmaceutical market.

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