Politics

The achievements of the *Medicines in Europe Forum's campaign* demonstrate that public pressure can get things moving in the right direction within the European Union. What it takes is determination, perseverance, unity, and coherent proposals.

There is plenty of room for public action. Take the case of the Cox-2 inhibitors, for example, and particularly that of celecoxib, a drug that has been prescribed to millions of patients despite a damning clinical evaluation (see pages 177). Why is this antiinflammatory drug still being prescribed? Why has it not yet been withdrawn from the market?

Prescribers and health authorities should err on the side of caution whenever there are doubts concerning the risk-benefit balance of a new drug. There are several reasons why celecoxib continues to be prescribed: some practitioners are unaware of the true risk-benefit balance; others are influenced by claims made by company reps, or automatically renew prescriptions initially made by so-called specialists, who are also victims of company disinformation (see page 198). Sometimes it is the patients, deceived by alluring media campaigns, who demand a particular brand.

The situation would be less alarming if the European regulatory agency, and most national agencies, did their job properly. Since they are funded by drug company fees, they are unwilling to make decisions that might undermine their principal source of income. Little by little, regulatory agencies have come to neglect their overriding mission: to promote and protect public health.

Governments have come and gone over the past two decades, but none have been able to halt the gradual transformation of regulatory agencies into little more than service providers to BigPharma. Decisions that might upset industrial paymasters are postponed or simply avoided.

The choice we are faced with is between a pharmaceutical market that is basically a free-for-all presided over by impotent industry-oriented regulatory agencies and governments, or one with clearly defined and explicitly stated public health priorities. A broad-ranging public debate is urgently needed in Europe.

Prescrire, along with other similarly minded organisations throughout the world, takes the view that regulatory agencies should be financially independent from the pharmaceutical industry. The task is now to persuade political authorities.

Politics, and particularly health politics, should consist of more than soundbites and short-sighted measures. Policies should also take into account the larger public good.

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