Translated from *Rev Prescrire* July 2009; 29 (309): 481

Black wall of secrecy

Before providing us with the reports that we requested on the adverse effects of *rimonabant* (ex-Acomplia°), the European Medicines Agency blacked out nearly every page (see page 231 of this issue). The Agency claimed to be protecting the commercial interests and intellectual property rights of the marketing authorisation holder, and no doubt the company concerned appreciates such protection. But, for their part, European citizens have a legal right to believe that their interests, including their health and safety, are being protected. After all, should not a public agency's loyalties lie chiefly with… the public? Pharmacovigilance data represent invaluable scientific knowledge that should be freely available to healthcare professionals and patients alike.

Independent organisations such as the Medicines in Europe Forum have a challenging task ahead to keep important information from being hidden from public scrutiny.

The French National Authority for Health (HAS) accepts that some members of its committees and task forces do not publicly declare links to the private sector that constitute potential conflicts of interest. And when an independent organisation such as Formindep blows the whistle on committee decisions made "under the influence" of Big Pharma, HAS simply turns a blind eye. As if the HAS considered itself above the scrutiny of the society to which it owes its very existence.

Similarly, the vast majority of medical opinion leaders in France see nothing wrong in expressing their views on health products in the media, without mentioning their financial links to the drug companies concerned, despite their legal obligation to do so. But why should they care? They are never censured, and the media, including public TV and radio, rarely demand compliance with this fundamental condition of transparency. The consumer organisation UFC-Que Choisir has decided to file a complaint with the Council of Physicians and the Ministry of Health against nine doctors who are flouting the transparency law.

"Transparency": just a passing fad? Transparency is widely advocated and proclaimed. However, drug regulatory agencies, drug companies and their mouthpieces do not practice what they preach. But if we the public, patients and health professionals do not insist on transparency, then opacity will continue to be the rule, public institutions will remain unaccountable, and healthcare quality will stagnate or even dangerously deteriorate.

Prescrire

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