Prescrire International Editorial

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Tooth and nail

Attempts are continually being made to undermine public health measures that interfere with vested commercial interests. The salt, sugar, asbestos, lead, alcohol and tobacco lobbies (among others) have sought, and in some cases are still seeking, to weaken or dismantle regulations intended to protect the public in the European Union. These vested interests never admit defeat, as they make sure usual businesses can go on and nothing or very little changes. They resort to tirelessly chipping away at rules which could hamper their activities.

In France, a law known as the Loi Evin, passed in 1991, represented a major milestone in the fight against alcohol abuse. Yet, in 2015, the French parliament voted overwhelmingly to relax the law on alcohol advertising, citing the "*economic interests of wine-producing regions*".

In the EU, the rules that govern marketing authorisation for new drugs date back to a 1965 Directive. Now, in 2016, a serious challenge is being made to weaken this legal framework on the grounds that "*rapid access to innovations*" is necessary "*in patients' interests"* (see p. 223).

The standard arguments used by those seeking to undermine public health measures include the claim that economic growth and technological progress are being hindered by red tape and risk aversion: true defenders of the public good are accused of being anti-progress.

Stakeholders, "motivated only by patients' interests…", complain that proper evaluation of new drugs before their market release is wasting precious time, preventing patients from gaining timely access to amazing therapeutic innovations.

Anyone taken in by these specious arguments should remember one thing: many legislative measures designed to protect public health were only implemented following major disasters. After all, the European marketing authorisation procedure was only set up after the *thalidomide* birth defect disaster. And measures to prevent alcohol abuse are motivated by the clear evidence of the health and social costs of alcohol-related harm, which vested interests would prefer to minimise or hide.

EU citizens would do well to demand real therapeutic progress, but they must not forget its corollary: the need for proper evaluation of new drugs before their market release. And they must fight, tooth and nail, against all those who seek to chip away at the many public health achievements.

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