Patient education: keep the best, avoid the rest

Therapeutic education is intended to help patients become more aware of factors affecting their health, as well as their illnesses and treatments. As such, it whets the appetite of advertising agencies and drug companies, particularly those seeking to increase patient loyalty to products used for long-term treatment. For example, this argument was used at a conference devoted to patient compliance: “Behavioural influences and compliance: learn how empowering patients can improve your return on investment” (1).

How is this new market controlled? In France, the law “Hospitals, patients, health and territories” (HPST) is intended to create a sound framework for patient education programmes, at least on paper... (a)(2-4). But many uncertainties remain, including effective control by regional health agencies (that have many other responsibilities); the role of patient groups, especially in terms of support programmes provided to patients, that must be protected from conflicts of interest when a programme is funded by companies; the quality and independence of educators; and the role of healthcare professionals.

Key role for healthcare professionals. The law gives healthcare professionals a number of important responsibilities, such as asking patients if they want to participate in educational programmes; coordinating programmes and playing a direct educational role; approaching patients on behalf of administrators of educational programmes, etc.

Patients need healthcare professionals to deliver quality care, not to act as salespeople for commercial therapeutic education programmes. All those concerned with quality healthcare must remain vigilant and critically examine available programmes. Prescrire encourages healthcare professionals and patients to inform us of any programme that appears suspect or inappropriate.

Once again, the responsibility lies with healthcare professionals firmly committed to acting in the best interests of their patients.

References