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Health info in doctors' waiting rooms: be selective!

Healthcare professionals play an important role in informing the public about health issues. Are the brochures found in doctors' waiting rooms a reliable source of information for patients?

Nearly 3500 brochures in 672 doctors' waiting rooms. The French consumer association UFC-Que Choisir collected 3411 brochures (1092 different ones) from 672 general practitioners' waiting rooms in 76 of France's 101 administrative districts (*départements*), between May and July 2013 (1).

Although there were no brochures in 41% of the waiting rooms, there were 9 different brochures on average in the others (range: 1 to 61). The topics most frequently addressed in the brochures were nutrition (15%), cancer (14%) and children's health (10%) (1).

Too many are simply advertisements. In 58% of cases, the brochures were actually advertisements, published by pharmaceutical companies (20%), food companies (13%) or health spas (5%). For example, UFC-Que Choisir compared two brochures about contraception. The brochure produced by the French National Institute for Prevention and Health Education (Inpes), a public organisation, discussed intrauterine devices first and devoted as much space to this method of contraception as to oral contraceptives. In contrast, the phar-

maceutical company MSD devoted just one line in the 12 pages of its brochure to intrauterine devices (1).

Refuse to distribute promotional materials. This survey came to the same conclusions as a 2011 report by the French National Consumers Institute (INC) (2). In this report, according to a marketing specialist (our translation): *"The doctor's waiting room is a prime location for marketing gurus. Consumers wait there for an unspecified amount of time, time in which their attention is available to receive advertising messages. (...) Not only is the timing ideal, but so is the location. Besides lending scientific credibility, the waiting room offers quite a few advantages for advertisers. Patients wait there for forty minutes on average, which is long enough to read several brochures, some more informative than others. In addition, there are no laws regulating what doctors can or cannot display in their waiting rooms. It is therefore up to doctors to assess the limits of what is acceptable in an environment dedicated to health"* (2).

The UFC-Que Choisir survey can take credit for reminding all healthcare professionals of their role in providing information to patients. It is up to healthcare professionals to ensure that areas devoted to the provision of health care are not allowed to become vectors for advertising or disinformation.

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Selected references from Prescrire's literature search.

1- Vennetier P and Bourcier I "Prospectus chez les médecins. Surtout de la réclame" *Que Choisir-Santé* 2014; (79): 4-7.

2- N'Sondé V and Chairopoulos P "Offensive marketing dans les salles d'attente" *60 millions de consommateurs* 2011; (464): 14-17.

