

Drug companies and patient groups: the influence of funding

● Patients should be able to rely on advocacy groups to push their interests, not those of pharmaceutical companies.

In France, as in other European countries, pharmaceutical companies are lobbying for the right to provide information directly to patients, including information about prescription drugs. And some patient groups they finance are pleading their cause (1,2).

Correlation between the views of patient groups and drug company funding. Health Action International (HAI) Europe conducted a questionnaire-based survey of patient and consumer organisations eligible for participation in certain European Medicines Agency (EMA) working parties (a). They found a correlation between the views expressed by these organisations on issues raised by the proposed European Information to Patients Directive and Regulation and their sources of funding (3).

All of the organisations funded by drug companies that responded to the survey said they were in favour of legislation allowing drug companies to disseminate information about drugs (b). Conversely, all the groups that did not receive funding from drug companies opposed the proposal (3).

Most of the groups, regardless of whether they received drug company funding, were opposed to allowing drug companies to disseminate information unsolicited by patients, i.e. information provided through broadcast media, such as radio, television, and print publications, such as newspaper supplements. However, when asked if drug companies should provide information solicited by the public, the majority of the groups that had no drug company funding opposed

the proposal, while the majority of the groups funded by drug companies supported this policy (3).

Financial independence is important. Securing long-term funding is certainly no easy matter. But this Health Action International survey demonstrates yet again that it is in patients' best interests if the groups that represent them are completely independent of drug companies, which sometimes use these groups as spokespeople and advocates for specific requests made to public authorities (4).

Patients count on these advocacy groups to get their views heard and to defend their interests, and not those of the pharmaceutical industry.

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a- Health Action International (HAI) is an international network of organisations and individuals, health professionals, patients and consumers. HAI works to promote the rational use of healthcare and medicines. Website: www.haiweb.org.

b- Most of the 10 out of 22 groups that refused to participate in the survey received funding from drug companies (ref. 3).

Selected references from Prescrire's literature search.

1- Prescrire Rédaction "Publicité grand public pour les médicaments de prescription? Un automne 2010 crucial" *Rev Prescrire* 2010; 30 (323): 700-701.

2- Prescrire Editorial Staff "Who funds patient groups?" *Prescrire Int* 2010; 19 (111): 293-294.

3- Perehudoff K and Leonardo Alves T "The patient and consumer voice and pharmaceutical industry sponsorship" Health Action and International Europe, Amsterdam 2011: 29 pages.

4- Prescrire Editorial Staff "Drug companies and patient groups: who benefits?" *Prescrire Int* 2009; 18 (102): 179.

