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More clarity needed in funding of patient groups

As part of the recent law on hospitals, patients and health *(Hôpital, Patients, Santé, Territoires)*, the French parliament initially refused to grant pharmaceutical companies the authorisation to communicate directly with the public about their prescription drugs, using various strategies ranging from "patient education" and "patient assistance" to "patient compliance" programmes (1). However, the senators of France's upper house subsequently removed this prohibition at the request of drug companies... but also at the request of certain patient groups.

A short-sighted strategy. The stance adopted by some patient groups is surprising, coming at a time when there are increasing concerns over conflicts of interest between opinion leaders and drug companies, as well as between drug regulatory agencies and drug companies. And at a time when pharmaceutical companies no longer hide their intention of making patients the focus of their commercial strategies.

It appears that certain patient groups in France prefer to accept funding from the pharmaceutical industry as well as its participation in patient education, rather than wait for uncertain public funding (2).

However, this short-sighted choice will provide government with an excuse not to fund an activity which, although in the public interest, is "already being funded" by drug companies.

This choice will enable drug companies to forge closer links with patient groups, lending more weight to their disputes with the government over their desire for more rapid drug approval as well as the prices and levels of reimbursement set for their products.

Loss of credibility. Drug company-funded patient groups risk losing credibility in the eyes of regulatory agencies, healthcare professionals and the general public.

Dependence on drug company subsidies is hardly consistent with a critical approach and making choices solely in the best interests of patients.

One thing is certain: drug company shareholders will only tolerate spending on patient education if it increases profits. To lose sight of this fact would be naive, hypocritical or cynical.

The need for independent patient groups. The development of advocacy groups representing patients and users of the healthcare system is essential to ensure that their interests are defended and their rights respected.

There is a need for strong advocacy groups, which exclusively serve patients, with no conflicts of interest.

It is also in health professionals' interests to deal with independent organisations rather than special interest groups subject to outside influence.

It is up to patients to establish advocacy groups that are shielded from commercial interests, and to find sources of funding that will guarantee the independence of patient groups currently subject to drug company influence.

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Selected references from Prescrire's literature search.
1- Bazot A, Davant JP, Toussaint B "Associations de patients et firmes pharmaceutiques: halte aux liaisons dangereuses" *Le Monde* 28 May 2009.
2- Raymond G and Vexiau P "Videz la loi HPST si vous le voulez, mais laissez-nous l'article 22 - 5 mai 2009". www.afd.asso.fr accessed 23 June 2009: 2 pages.

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