

Our French edition carries each year in its April issue an April fool's joke resembling an ordinary paper. Compilations of these jokes are available in French on request. Here is the 2003 vintage.

Tour de France: ads in the saddle!

Late December 2002: Jean-Marie Leblanc, director of the Tour de France, presents the route layout for 2004. Commentators note that the Tour will depart from Belgium and go through only 16 of the 25 European Union member states. Hardly anyone notices the changes to the funding structure.

In conversation with a financial journalist, Jean-Marie Leblanc has stated that he is studying a fallback solution in case Credit Lyonnais pulls out of Tour de France sponsorship, and that negotiations with the French pharmaceutical federation LEEM are nearing completion (a)(1).

Innovative partnerships. A sponsorship project is thus nearing completion between a pool of a dozen drug companies (led by the new group PfizerFarcia, under the aegis of LEEM) and Tour de France Plc (2). Pool members will sponsor the different jerseys, and also buy about 50% of available advertising space in the Tour de France caravan.

PfizerFarcia has already reserved the jersey for the overall individual leader. Three other companies, manufacturing growth hormones and erythropoietin, have opted for the spotted jersey for the best climber. Two companies manufacturing steroids and beta 2-stimulant bronchodilators have opted for "the most combative rider" jersey.

According to our sources, the PfizerFarcia campaign, initially planned for the Tour's 100th birthday (in 2003), is the most advanced (3). The route and staging posts will be draped with Viagra blue (b). Start podiums will praise PfizerFarcia's new antidepressant, and arrival podiums will distribute Viagra[®] (c). The chase car will advertise Celebrex[®] and Zithromax[®]. During each leg, company cars (disguised as capsules, syringes, suppositories, etc.) will distribute specially designed sample boxes (d). In agreement with the French pharmacists' union, high-street pharmacies located along the route will distribute free Zolodetectors to all clients holding a prescription for an antidepressant, throughout the month of July (e). The day before each leg, "patient support groups" (specially created and funded for the occasion by PfizerFarcia) will hold debates on "Health



through Investment and vice versa", to be broadcast live on French public radio and TV (f).

International support. The other pool members are also proposing some highly innovative campaigns, such as saddles covered with ruscus anti-haemorrhoid cream; satellite-based infant dehydration tests; fitness tests for lifelong inclusion in phase IV trials; etc.

LEEM assured us that they obtained the necessary authorisation for their "public information campaign" from the European Commission. Philibert Burnett, an EC official with a lot of stamina and chief supporter of direct-to-public advertising by drug manufacturers, put it this way: "This is a prime example of how the previously wasted energies of private enterprise can be harnessed to the public good".

Resistance. The machine is too well oiled, it can be stopped only by organised resistance. Let's hope the European Council of Health Ministers and the European Parliament hold firm and apply the brake on this LEEM project, once and for all.

Or will concerned European citizens have to bar the Tour's route with truck loads of unused drugs?

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a- For many years the Tour de France has received substantial funding from Credit Lyonnais, which notably sponsors the Yellow Jersey (bearing the bank's lion logo). Credit Agricole, which is seeking to take over Credit Lyonnais and whose trademark colour is green, is intending to switch sponsoring of the Yellow Jersey to the Green Jersey (worn by the overall points leader). Sponsorship of the Yellow Jersey would thus become vacant.

b- Heated discussions are currently taking place between PfizerFarcia and the Tour organisers concerning the colour of the jersey to be worn by the first place in individual ranking. Citing its major financial contribution, PfizerFarcia wants the Yellow Jersey to be dyed (Viagra) blue. The Tour organisers are refusing. Commentators expect a compromise on a yellow jersey with blue stripes (to be called the Yellow Zebra).

c- The French health authority has demanded that each box include a pack of condoms. However, the French drugs agency considers that this creates a conflict between regulations governing drugs and those governing medical devices in the context of mass distribution for health education purposes (the justification for this position statement has not been made public).

d- Each box will contain a unit dose of the drugs marketed by the firm (a practice reminiscent of the African marketplace); it will then be up to each consumer to obtain a prescription from the physician of his or her choice (a list is helpfully provided on the information leaflet).

e- The Zolodetector is a mini electronic device with a battery life of about a month. It can be worn as a broach or, more discretely, in a pocket. It starts to vibrate when it comes within two metres of another Zolodetector. In this way patients on antidepressants can recognise each other and exchange impressions on their past or present treatments. PfizerFarcia hopes that users of its antidepressant will extol its virtues. With approval from the Episodic Medical Education Union, prescribers will receive 23 minutes of specific post-university training, which will encourage them to prescribe Zolof[®] only to the least severely affected (and therefore most easily satisfied) patients.

f- At the time of going to press we have not yet received confirmation that Bernard Kouchner (former French Health Minister and best-selling author) is intending to participate in the debates. One of his predecessors, Philippe Douste-Blazy, told us he would be prepared to step in on behalf of patient support groups if needed to avoid empty chairs.

1- Anonymous "Qui va financer le Tour en 2004?" L'Équipe-Supplément Sponsoring 25 December 2003: 3592-3693.

2- LEEM "Si tu LEEM, chronique n° 3: un p'tit Tour et puis..." 2002; 00 (3): 01-04.

3- Anonymous "Plan de campagne 007-Top secret" Unpublished document: 2 pages.