

Phasing out patient leaflets in paper form: eco-responsible or irresponsible?

In 2023, the European Commission embarked on a thorough revision of Europe's pharmaceutical legislation. One of the proposed changes is to gradually phase out package leaflets in paper format and replace them with an electronic version (1).

France has decided to trial the use of electronic package leaflets for certain drugs in hospitals and community pharmacies in 2024, as part of its "ecological planning" strategy for the healthcare system (2-4). In hospitals, package leaflets would be replaced immediately with a QR code affixed to the box, enabling users to access an electronic version of the package leaflet, potentially accompanied by interactive forms or videos providing practical information. In community pharmacies, both formats would be provided at first, but the paper format would eventually be phased out and printed at the pharmacy if requested by the patient (2). The ministries concerned claim that the initiative is intended to reduce the carbon footprint of drugs, which are estimated to account for 20% of the total emissions generated by France's healthcare sector (3,5).

The package leaflet is the patient's main source of information about their treatments. In France, its inclusion in the packaging of every drug is still a legal obligation. It specifies the drug's authorised uses, recommended dosages, adverse effects, any contraindications to its use and its interactions with other substances or foods. It provides essential details about how and when to take the drug, and about any special warnings and precautions that must be taken, for example when driving or in certain situations such as pregnancy. Its presence in the box is crucial to medication safety (6).

Prescrire opposes the plan to phase out paper package leaflets, proposed in the revision of European pharmaceutical legislation that is currently in progress. The people most likely to suffer from the shift from paper to electronic leaflets are those who live in places with limited internet access or who are not comfortable using digital technology, such as older patients who often take multiple medications, and vulnerable patients (1). Members of the European Parliament have made the phasing out of paper package leaflets conditional on a "consultation of patients, carers and other relevant stakeholders" (7). Prescrire hopes that member states will go further in their defence of paper package leaflets.

The provision of an electronic package leaflet alongside the paper leaflet may indeed be an advance, provided that the electronic version comes from a reliable source, that it is dated and kept up to date, and that updates are clearly highlighted (6).

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