

A public awareness campaign which mainly benefits companies

● The pharmaceutical company Abbvie, which markets *adalimumab* (Humira®), has jointly funded a public awareness campaign produced by the patient organisation France Psoriasis. Objective: marketing.

In late 2018, a poster campaign in the Paris metro was aimed at drawing the attention of passengers to the suffering experienced by persons with psoriasis (a)(1). This public awareness campaign was rolled out under the name of the patient organisation France Psoriasis, one of whose objectives is to raise awareness about psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis, and their treatments.

A commercial strategy centred on the patient. In order to fund this poster campaign, France Psoriasis signed agreements with several pharmaceutical companies, including Abbvie (1). Abbvie provided financial support for France Psoriasis, up to as much as 138 000 euros over six years, according to the website www.eurosfordocs.fr. This company markets Humira®, based on *adalimumab*, a TNF-alpha antagonist immunosuppressant authorised, among other indications, as second-line treatment for psoriatic arthritis and plaque psoriasis, as well as treatment for rheumatoid arthritis and ankylosing spondylitis (1,2). The harm-benefit balance of *adalimumab* is no better than that of other TNF-alpha antagonists, and some so-called biosimilar versions of Humira® are less expensive (1,2).

Under the guise of a public health mission, public awareness campaigns focusing on chronic diseases and other conditions, such as the France Psoriasis campaign, form an integral part of the commercial strategy of some companies (3). According to one healthcare marketing professional, these campaigns are designed to raise awareness, to create an unmet need, to change behaviour and to persuade people of the need for treatment (3).

Public health information aimed at promotion. Another marketing campaign funded by Abbvie and involving patient organisations began in 2014 with the title "Don't turn your back on it". In 2018, its slogan was "I've danced too much, my back hurts", and its objective, according to the company, was avoiding the "underdiagnosis" of rare diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis and ankylosing spondylitis. Abbvie made a five-question test available to the public, via a temporary website dedicated to the campaign. This test was aimed at identifying the causes of back pain and amounted to a type of screening (b). This test has low speci-

ficity and is not reliable: 93% of persons who test "positive" may incorrectly think that they have "back pain of inflammatory origin", running the risk of harm from unjustified prescriptions for TNF-alpha antagonists with their numerous adverse effects (1,4,5).

Financial dependence poses a problem. In October 2019, five organisations, including France Psoriasis and two organisations belonging to the France Assos Santé federation, spoke out against the substitution of biosimilars by community pharmacists, particularly *adalimumab* biosimilars (6). France Assos Santé is divided on this issue and on that of company funding (7).

By making themselves dependent on company funding, patient organisations are putting their credibility on the line (8).

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a- This awareness campaign was the subject of one of the investigative articles entitled "Pharma papers" published by the independent online media website bastamag.net in November 2018.

b- The website and the questionnaire could no longer be accessed on 20 March 2020.

Selected references from Prescrire's literature search

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- 4- Formindep "Publi-information sous dépendance industrielle - Décryptage d'une campagne publicitaire déguisée" 17 April 2015. www.formindep.fr accessed 14 October 2019: 14 pages.
- 5- Prescrire Rédaction "Anti-TNF alpha" *Interactions Médicamenteuses Prescrire* 2020.
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- 7- APM "Officine: le président de France assos santé se prononce en faveur de la substitution biosimilaire" 21 October 2019: 3 pages.
- 8- Prescrire Editorial Staff "Drug companies and patient groups: who benefits?" *Prescrire Int* 2009; **18** (102): 179.