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Health professionals and patients: adopt the INN!

Prescrire has long advocated the use of the international non-proprietary name (INN), as an important tool in the appropriate use of medicines. When patients and health care professionals speak a common language – the INN system – they are less subject to commercial pressures and can fully assume their respective responsibilities: the physician can concentrate on his or her patients; the pharmacist can focus on adapting and monitoring treatment; and the patient is in a better position to use his or her drugs as prescribed.

The Medicines in Europe Forum, of which Prescrire is a founding member, launched a public campaign on the use of the INN system in October 2005. Direct-to-consumer advertising is spreading rapidly in Europe even though it is prohibited. There is a lack of reference points in an increasingly competitive and overcrowded market, where each manufacturer claims its latest drug is a sort of panacea. Helping patients to recognize the INN and to use the INN when talking to health care professionals provides them with one such reference point.

A drug's real name

The INN is quite simply a drug's real name, i.e. the name of the active ingredient which is supposed to cure or prevent a health disorder (1).

Adopting the INN system means refusing to use a drug without knowing what it contains, and refusing to place one's trust in a trade name or advertising slogan. Adopting the INN system as a common language shared by patients and health care pro-

fessionals means opting for transparency and for appropriate use of carefully selected pharmaceutical products.

In 1950 the World Health Assembly called on the World Health Organization (WHO) to create an INN system by 1953. The aim was to develop a specific name for each drug substance that would be recognizable and pronounceable by people in every country in the world, thereby avoiding unnecessary confusion. The overriding idea was to create a common global language that would cut through the fog of multiple trade names.

WHO uses a precise coding system to select each INN, often incorporating "common stems" that allow users to recognise substances belonging to the same pharmacological or chemical class: for example, the suffix "olol" is used for betablockers (atenolol, propranolol, etc.), and "azepam" for benzodiazepines (diazepam, tetrazepam, etc.).

A valuable tool for patients and health care professionals

INNs are useful for those who prescribe, dispense or recommend drugs, as well as for patients. Instead of having to memorise multiple trade names, physicians and pharmacists can learn a shorter list of INNs, allowing them more time to devote to their patients, and to encourage the proper use of the drugs they prescribe and dispense. In 2005 there were more than 8000 drug trade names in France, but only 1700 INNs.

Adopting the INN system implies eschewing company product brochures based on trade names in favour of independent sources of information that identify the safest and most effective drugs based on comparative data.

Well-informed patients. When a drug such as tramadol, which is effective on pain but has many adverse effects (neurological and gastrointestinal, as well as a risk of dependence) is sold in France under more than 10 trade names, patients really need to know the INN. By recognising the INN on drug packaging, they can avoid the risk of taking the same medication several times under different trade names.

When pharmaceutical companies engage in direct-to-consumer advertising for the same anti-allergy drug under different trade names, patients are better informed when they realise that the same drug, cetirizine, with only limited efficacy, lurks behind these various names.

The pharmaceutical market has become overcrowded and highly competitive. Drug companies are continually inventing new and complex commercial strategies, making tools such as the INN more essential than ever in order to prevent errors in administering medication due to confusion about trade names, overdose by concurrent use of the same drug under different trade names, and drug interactions resulting



from lack of awareness of the active ingredients contained in brand names.

International communication. The use of the INN also makes things easier for travellers who need to obtain a specific drug while abroad: lists of equivalent international trade name can never be exhaustive because of the very rapid pace of change in the marketplace. For example, the analgesic tramadol is marketed under about a hundred different trade names throughout the world.

When health care professionals have to spend time trying to identify exactly what drugs foreign patients are taking, they have less time to attend to the patients themselves.

Opting for the INN means the freedom to choose the best treatment approach

Proponents of trade names argue that using the INN system is impractical. They argue that INNs are far too complex for physicians, pharmacists and especially for patients to remember. However, overall, INNs are neither longer nor more complex than the corresponding trade names. In any case, it is clearly easier to remember and use a single word such as paracetamol rather than 17 uninformative trade names (for instance in France).

Some proponents of trade names claim that health care professionals learn trade names and not INNs in medical and pharmacy school. If this is still the case in some institutions then this practice must stop: lecturers teaching the properties and uses of available pharmaceutical products must use the INN system; they have no reason whatsoever to use trade names.

The INN system was created more than half a century ago, in response to a global need.

The pharmaceutical market is undergoing major expansion and upheaval as the industry restructures. Direct-to-consumer advertising is intensifying, with the result that drug use is increasingly uncontrolled. Use of the INN is no longer a simple question of common sense: it is urgently needed in order to set solid reference points and to preserve freedom of choice.

A properly understood INN system facilitates communication between patients and health care professionals, both nationally and internationally. The INN system helps everyone to be better informed, to use drugs rationally, to avoid confusion and errors, and to reduce waste. The time has come for an energetic campaign to promote the use of the INN.

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1- Prescrire Editorial Staff "Think INN, prescribe INN, dispense INN" *Prescrire Int* 2000; 9 (50): 184-190.

The INN - a drug's real name

The reasons for using the INN system, the (rare) limitations, public information leaflets, can be downloaded free from www.prescrire.org

The INN: a drug's real name

A public information campaign targeting consumers, patients and health care professionals, and promoting the use of international nonproprietary names (INN), was launched under the aegis of the Medicines in Europe Forum.

In October 2005, a public-oriented campaign to promote the use of the INN was launched in France by several members of the Medicines in Europe Forum: Association Mieux Prescrire (AMP), Union Fédérale des Consommateurs (UFC) Que Choisir (a consumer group), and Mutualité Française FNMF (mutual health insurance). The campaign is intended to inform the public of the numerous advantages of using the INN system, and to promote its adoption. The campaign will focus on explaining why the INN system was initially created, and will seek to induce changes in behaviour. The campaign will encourage people to think, speak, learn, teach and communicate using the INN system (and not only when prescribing and dispensing).

Plan of action. Practical leaflets outlining the many advantages of the INN system will be widely distributed through the media resources of campaign members. Each leaflet will present a practical situation involving the use of medication in which the INN system provides an advantage or a solution. Leaflet 1 explains the INN system, and leaflet 2 cautions against the risk of overdose [to be translated soon].

All the leaflets will be available free of charge, notably on the Internet.

This phase of the INN campaign will last at least 12 months. Your remarks and suggestions are welcome.

How to help the INN campaign. The Medicines in Europe Forum is mainly concerned with ensuring that the INN leaflets are widely distributed, understood, and used on a daily basis. We encourage our subscribers, and all those concerned with rational drug usage, to download the INN leaflets from our website, to distribute them, and to display them in pharmacies, medical practices, etc.

Use of the INN cannot be imposed from above. However, it stands a good chance of being widely adopted if health professionals, patients, consumers and health insurers put their minds to it.

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The French "logo" of the campaign:



DCI : Dénomination Commune Internationale = INN (International Nonproprietary Name)