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Think about drug packaging

Think about drug packaging. When making treatment decisions, think about whether the packaging is adapted to the patient's situation and abilities. Identify any potential sources of confusion over the drug's identity or the correct doses to administer. Verify that a dosing device is provided and that the prescribed dose can be prepared and administered accurately, without posing a risk to the patient. Make sure that the patient leaflet is effective in protecting patients from any serious risks. Ensure that the packaging is safe and practical for vulnerable patients. Is clear, effective information provided about any risks during pregnancy? Can the paediatric dose be easily prepared? Is the cap child-proof? Is the needle concealed or retractable? Are the labelling and leaflet easy to read, even for visually impaired patients?

During debates on France's drug safety bill, *Prescrire* put forth proposals which stressed the importance of safe and convenient drug packaging. Neither of these issues has been addressed by the new legislation.

Yet packaging is a fundamental part of a drug's harm-benefit balance and is a key factor in proper drug use and in the prevention of medication errors. An interest in packaging requires no particular specialist knowledge. It is simply a matter of getting in the habit of thinking about packaging and taking the time to talk with patients about their specific situation. Thorough and detailed information,

advice and warnings should be provided, without omissions or unnecessary jargon.

These basic principles should also be applied before market launch by the pharmaceutical companies that design drug packaging and the drug regulatory agencies that approve drug packaging. Judging by the current state of the pharmaceutical market, they frequently overlook or are indifferent to this essential aspect of drug safety (see *Prescrire* Int n° 131).

It took 30 years and the Mediator° (benfluorex) disaster for the French drug regulatory agency to take steps to improve transparency. Will it take another 30 years and more deaths before safe and convenient packaging is recognised as an essential component of quality care?

All stakeholders must take action. Health-care professionals must think about packaging when making treatment decisions and adopt a proactive approach to the prevention of medication errors in their practice and teaching. The pharmaceutical industry must invest in designing suitable, safe packaging. Drug regulatory agencies must improve their analysis of packaging in order to safeguard users (see "Packaging of medicines for paediatric use: *Prescrire's* response to EMA" at english.prescrire.org). Those who pay for healthcare should consider convenient packaging as one of the criteria for reimbursement.

Think about drug packaging: patients will benefit.

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