

Getting back on the right track

The four main players in the healthcare field are health professionals (and their organisations), patients, consumers (and their organisations), policy makers and administrators (and regulatory agencies), and healthcare companies (and their associations). The health of the population, and that of each individual member of society, depends on the balance of power between these four players. Unfortunately, since the 1990s, healthcare professionals and governments have allowed the private sector too much influence over the rules of the game.

The regulations governing marketing authorisation have become increasingly complex, but manufacturers have profited far more than public health. Regulatory agencies, now mainly financed through fees paid by manufacturers, are granting marketing authorisation more and more rapidly (and often prematurely), allowing drugs on the market that have the potential to create more harm than benefit.

Similarly, drug companies have abused tax breaks and other economic advantages, extended their market exclusivity through artificial means, and imposed increasingly high prices on health insurers and patients alike. Witness the gross misuse of the European regulation on orphan drugs (see pages 36-42).

Healthcare professionals have allowed drug companies to infiltrate their institutions, to influence their practices, and to undermine their freedom of thought, from the beginning of their stud-

ies right through their professional careers, under the guise of “partnerships”, sponsored “training”, “support” for universities, etc.

More recently, drug companies have started to address the public directly. They are aggressively promoting their products, beyond the framework of reasonable self-medication, indulging in direct-to-consumer advertising of prescription-only drugs, disguised as “information” and seeking to retain patients through bogus “medicine compliance programmes”, or “coaching” (see pages 32-33).

BigPharma has achieved all this by infiltrating the media, and by co-opting journalists, politicians, healthcare professionals and patient associations alike.

Fortunately, throughout the world, many healthcare professionals and ordinary citizens have a different perspective on health issues. Resistance is growing. There is still time to get back on track. This is why *Association Mieux Prescrire*, the non-profit organisation that publishes *la revue Prescrire* and *Prescrire International*, has decided to strengthen its activities in several areas. For example, *Prescrire International* will now be published in four colours, for greater clarity and impact. And, in 2007, we will launch an English-language website for subscribers and all those who seek reliable information untainted by industry interests.

We wish all our readers an excellent New Year.

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