Prescrire International Editorial

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Lessons from the Mediator° scandal

In recent months France has been reexamining its policies and practices governing the approval and use of medicines, and the respective roles of different stakeholders. The Mediator° (*benfluorex*) scandal has put drug companies and regulatory agencies under scrutiny and revealed their harmful habits.

Relatively speaking, healthcare professionals and patients have been spared from the spotlight cast by France's general health services inspectorate (*Inspection générale des affaires sociales, IGAS*), parliamentary committees and investigative journalists. Yet there is no denying that Mediator° was prescribed by doctors and dispensed by pharmacists, often for the purpose of weight loss and outside the approved indications, sometimes at the insistent urging of patients.

The Mediator° scandal triggered a vast round of analysis and recommendations, prompting regulatory agencies to amend some of their policies and practices. For the time being, French authorities and regulatory bodies seem to be trying to distance themselves from drug companies — who are, it must be remembered, profit-seeking entities whose activities need to be regulated, and not neutral, disinterested partners in the healthcare arena.

If France is to truly learn the lessons of the Mediator° scandal, healthcare professionals and patients must also distance themselves, not just from drug companies and government agencies, but from drugs themselves.

Healthcare professionals must be prepared to tell their patients there is no adequate medication to satisfy their demands, for example to lose weight. They must also have the courage to refrain from prescribing or recommending drugs simply to satisfy their inner need to "do something", and must henceforth base their treatment decisions on the best available scientific evidence.

It is better for patients not to rely too much on drugs, in a variety of domains. They must be wary of media experts and of the personal opinions of neighbours, relatives or internet forums. They must retain a critical mind and seek out reliable sources of information.

In other words, the people who deal with medicines day in and day out, healthcare professionals and patients, must think in terms of harms and benefits of new and existing drugs, consider the likely natural outcome, and choose the safest and most effective options for treatment and prevention.

And this will remain the job that healthcare professionals and patients need to do, whenever they get together. Even if and when drug companies and regulatory agencies do change their ways for the better — and for good.

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