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Conflicts of interest: industry versus healthcare professionals

In the field of health care, the concept of conflicts of interest is raised when experts are influenced in their medical activities or their public health decisions by their ties (often financial) with the pharmaceutical industry. A pharmaceutical company has exploited this concept in an attempt to defend its own interests (1).

A pharmaceutical company disputes EMA's position. A British pharmaceutical company applied for marketing authorisation (MA) for an over-the-counter triptan antimigraine drug (1). The European Medicines Agency (EMA) issued a negative opinion due to an increased cardiovascular risk, which would require medical supervision during treatment (1). After unsuccessfully challenging this decision directly with the EMA, the company lodged a complaint with the European Ombudsman.¹

According to the company, the EMA's opinion was invalidated by conflicts of interests: "*physicians and pharmacists represented on that committee [the EMA's marketing authorisation committee] have a financial interest in ensuring that medicines can be dispensed by prescription only. (...) there is a risk that physicians see the increased availability of non-prescription medicines as a threat to their "prescription franchise" and income*" (1).

After examining the EMA's responses to the company's grievances, the European Ombudsman rejected the complaint, citing the EMA's argument

that the presence of doctors on its committees had not prevented the approval of other over-the-counter drugs in the past (1).

Enemies or partners? In France, in the aftermath of the Mediator² scandal, the increased popularity of the concept of conflicts of interest as a risk factor in public health irritates certain opinion leaders, who lay the blame on idealists dragging public opinion into a sterile and pernicious battle of words (2).

Yet far from being a campaign waged against the pharmaceutical industry and experts with ties to industry, the concept of conflicts of interest makes it possible to understand the nature and sources of actual bias that could be harmful to patients and to public health (3).

Some pharmaceutical companies try to exploit the concept of conflicts of interest, as this complaint to the European Ombudsman shows, even if it means presenting doctors as the enemy. This is worth pondering by those who consider pharmaceutical companies the natural "partners" of health-care professionals.

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Selected references from Prescrire's literature search.

- 1- "Decision of the European Ombudsman closing the inquiry into complaint 364/2013/(EIS)PMC against the European Medicines Agency (EMA)" www.ombudsman.europa.eu, accessed 18 August 2014: 15 pages.
- 2- Vallancien G "Il faut cesser de s'en prendre à l'industrie pharmaceutique" *Les Échos* 24 January 2013: 1 page.
- 3- Prescrire Rédaction "Relations professions de santé-industrie. Les conflits d'intérêts" *Rev Prescrire* 2000; **20** (204): 229-230.