

Publication

Accuracy of drug advertisements in medical journals under new law regulating the marketing of pharmaceutical products in Switzerland

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BACKGROUND: New legal regulations for the marketing of pharmaceutical products were introduced in 2002 in Switzerland. We investigated whether claims in drug advertisements citing published scientific studies were justified by these studies after the introduction of these new regulations. **METHODS:** In this cross-sectional study, two independent reviewers screened all issues of six major Swiss medical journals published in the year 2005 to identify all drug advertisements for analgesic, gastrointestinal and psychopharmacologic drugs and evaluated all drug advertisements referring to at least one publication. The pharmaceutical claim was rated as being supported, being based on a potentially biased study or not to be supported by the cited study according to pre-specified criteria. We also explored factors likely to be associated with supported advertisement claims. **RESULTS:** Of 2068 advertisements 577 (28%) promoted analgesic, psychopharmacologic or gastrointestinal drugs. Among them were 323 (56%) advertisements citing at least one reference. After excluding multiple publications of the same drug advertisement and advertisements with non-informative references, there remained 29 unique advertisements with at least one reference to a scientific study. These 29 advertisements contained 78 distinct pairs of claims of analgesic, gastrointestinal and psychopharmacologic drugs and referenced studies. Thirty-seven (47%) claims were supported, 16 (21%) claims were not supported by the corresponding reference, and 25 (32%) claims were based on potentially biased evidence, with no relevant differences between drug groups. Studies with conflict of interest and studies stating industry funding were more likely to support the corresponding claim (RR 1.52, 95% CI 1.07-2.17 and RR 1.50, 95% CI 0.98-2.28) than studies without identified conflict of interest and studies without information on type of funding. **CONCLUSION:** Following the introduction of new regulations for drug advertisement in Switzerland, 53% of all assessed pharmaceutical claims published in major medical journals are not supported by the cited referenced studies or based on potentially biased study information. In light of the discrepancy between the new legislation and the endorsement of these regulations, physicians should not trust drug advertisement claims even when they seem to refer to scientific studies.

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