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## BOOK REVIEW

### Promoting Health or Pushing Drugs?

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This book published by Health Action International (HAI) looks critically at the marketing of pharmaceuticals. Marketing of pharmaceuticals is big business and it has been said that the pharmaceutical industry spends more money on marketing than on research and development [1]. This book written and edited by some of the leading personalities involved in promoting the more rational use of medicines helps to get a bird's eye view of pharmaceutical marketing and drug promotion.

The book has been divided into chapters titled 'Introduction', 'What is drug promotion?', 'Cost of promotion', 'Misleading promotion', 'Industry codes', 'Advertising', 'Direct-to-consumer advertising', 'Sales representatives', 'Bribes', 'Gifts', 'Symposia', 'Post-marketing surveillance studies', 'Consequence of uncontrolled drug promotion' and 'Toward solutions'.

The strength of book is the remarkable photographs, boxes and copies of industry advertising material provided to readers. The first chapter quotes Professor Bill Inman of the Drug Safety Unit at the University of Southampton, United Kingdom (UK) as saying 'There are simply not enough sick people around to satisfy the desires of the marketing managers of drug companies.'

The book is dated and companies may think twice before commissioning certain of the advertisements today. One of the ads says 'We know her doctor better than she does'. Another proudly proclaims 'We've developed a habit of getting doctors to put pen to paper' along with a prescription pad.

Drug companies often advertise medicines for non-approved uses. The book lists some examples. Video material is mentioned here (as relevant to the mid nineties) and these days it is more likely to be in the West and even in South Asia, advertisements on the website or downloadable videos. Record of the industry regarding self-regulation has not been good. Industry has often been found breaking their own codes and the book lists certain specific examples. A senior attorney for the New York Times has pointed out 'All advertising is inherently misleading. That's how you sell things.' The World Health Organization (WHO) has set out minimum requirements for drug advertisements in 'Ethical criteria for medicinal drug promotion'. Advertisements and advertising has been shown not to meet standards in a number of studies. Direct-To-Consumer Advertising (DTCA) of prescription drugs is becoming an 'important topic' with the European Union (EU) considering making DTCA legal in Europe. Companies advertise to the public to ask their doctors for a particular medicine for a common disease condition. Attapulgit was advertised to consumers as a medicine which would clean out the impurities associated with diarrhea. However, a publication by WHO mentions that attapulgit does not possess significant antidiarrheal activity and should not be used. Other examples are also discussed in the book.

Sales representatives (called medical representatives (MRs) in south Asia) have been found to be a very effective means of pharmaceutical promotion. Reps use a number of means to promote their products. Pens, note pads, calendars containing the name of product remind the doctors to prescribe a particular drug. The book analyzes the question 'Do sales representatives provide reliable information?' The French bulletin 'La Revue Prescrire' in the nineties had requested its readers to stop receiving sales reps for a period of one year and also set up a network of general practitioners to observe what kind of information the reps were providing. The results from these initiatives are discussed. The book strongly recommends that commissions and targets for sales reps should be discontinued and medicines should not be promoted and marketed like other commodities.

The chapter 'Gifts' talks about various gifts and bribes, offered by pharma companies to doctors, to prescribe their products. Television sets, refrigerators, trips to Miami and Paris have all been offered. Portuguese companies according to the book had advertised using the following catch line 'prescribe freely and you can see the world'. The book also briefly describes the guidelines of the American Medical Association on gifts to doctors. There is a need for similar guidelines in our part of the world. Even in the United States (US) these guidelines are often breached. Companies often sponsor doctors to attend symposia or conferences with their families and encourage them to mix business with pleasure. The US FDA has drawn up a checklist for sponsored meetings which may be useful if you intend to obtain sponsorship from the industry for a conference, symposia or Continuing Medical Education (CME).

What are the consequences of uncontrolled drug promotion? The major consequence of uncontrolled drug promotion is irrational use of drugs. The book shows an advertisement

of an antihistamine being promoted as an appetite stimulant in South America. The possible problem may not be lack of appetite but rather lack of enough food to eat! The book ends with possible solutions regarding the problem in chapter 'Toward solutions'. The main suggested solutions are: industry codes should be strengthened and adequately enforced, national regulation must be strengthened, and WHO ethical criteria should be strengthened and implemented. The book talks about various solutions which have been implemented to improve prescribing. The list of useful addresses is dated and may not be useful. The list of references is interesting and comprehensive but is again dated. High production values characterize this book. Being active in promoting the more rational use of medicines I found this book very interesting and informative.

The book would be of interest to pharmacologists, pharmacists, prescribers, health planners, policy makers and all those interested in promoting more rational use of medicines. The book is dated and HAI should consider bringing out a new edition soon. However, the issue of inappropriate and aggressive promotion remains of relevance even today. If anything, the intervening years have made this issue more vital and pressing.

## About The Book

Chetley A, Mintzes B (eds). Promoting health or pushing drugs? Health Action International. ISBN 90-74006-03-5.

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## Reference

[1]. Angell M. Excess in the pharmaceutical industry. CMAJ 2004;171:1451-3.

