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THE PHARMACEUTICAL INDUSTRY AND THE LAY PRESS

THE INDUSTRY'S POINT OF VIEW¹

Abstract

The general public has a high degree of interest in information relating to health and illness. Family magazines and daily newspapers play an important role as sources of information about these subjects. Journalists writing about medicines in newspapers in the Netherlands have been found to use a series of complementary sources to obtain ideas and information on this subject; the pharmaceutical industry is one of the sources used by them. In this paper we explore the role of the lay press as a communication channel for pharmaceutical companies. The results of this study show that information from the pharmaceutical industry to the general public has become increasingly extensive and emphatic. Pharmaceutical companies consider that it is important to inform a lay audience about their products and about the diseases for which they can be used. The lay press, both daily newspapers and family magazines, can play an important role in informing a lay audience about diseases and new or improved products. If the lay press pays attention to these products many potential 'users' can be reached. Pharmaceutical companies do approach mass media journalists with information about products in various ways at different moments. As long as independent and critical journalists and editors decide for themselves whether information about drugs coming from pharmaceutical companies is newsworthy enough to be published, what reaches the printed page is likely to be genuine news and not hidden advertising. Journalist should make very clear to the reader which sources have been used to compile the article, so that the reader can decide for himself whether he wishes to regard the information as reliable.

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5.1

INTRODUCTION

The general public has a high degree of interest in information relating to health and illness [1]. Family magazines and daily newspapers play an important role as sources of information about these subjects [2-4]. These sources are also used by health professionals and researchers to obtain new scientific and medical information [5-7].

Journalists play the most important role in deciding what becomes news; they determine not only what information people can obtain from the mass media but also the manner in which that information is presented and can be interpreted. Journalists writing about medicines in newspapers in the Netherlands have been found to use a series of complementary sources to obtain ideas and information on this subject; their major source of information is the scientific medical literature, followed by information emanating directly from researchers and universities. The pharmaceutical industry is considered to be less important by journalists themselves, but it proves to be the third most frequently cited source of information in the newspaper articles relating to medicines [8]. Not only the journalist and the editors decide what becomes news, sources such as researchers and pharmaceutical companies themselves decide what information they reveal, which details they highlight or discard, and when the story is to be made available to the press. Every such decision, which makes some data visible to the press and relegates other data (at least provisionally) to obscurity is an act of news management as well [9].

Although it is clear that any of these sources may be regarded as being in their own interest to release their data for publication in newspapers or magazines, we will concentrate here on the interests and activities of the pharmaceutical industry. There are two major reasons for examining this particular source. First of all, although journalists had expressed to us considerable scepticism regarding information emanating from this source one in fact found that they used its information relatively frequently [8]. Secondly, there is indeed evidence that the pharmaceutical industry is becoming increasingly interested in the passing of messages through the mass media to the general public [10] and to health professionals [11].

Pharmaceutical companies use several different strategies to promote their drugs. Most of these promotional efforts focus on health professionals, particularly the physicians who prescribe

these products. Through advertisements in medical journals, direct mailing, and visits by drug company representatives, health professionals are made aware of the arrival of new drugs and of news relating to older ones. Furthermore companies organise meetings, conferences and distribute free drug samples and gifts to promote their products and improve their image. To an ever greater extent, these activities have become regulated by codes of promotional practice, notably those drawn up jointly by the pharmaceutical manufacturers themselves (for example the "European Code of Practice for the Promotion of Medicines" adopted by the European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries' Associations [12]) and codes or standards issued by the health authorities [13,14]. The implementation of these codes sometimes appears unsatisfactory [15], but they nevertheless are experienced by industry as something of a brake on its promotional activities. Partly because of this, pharmaceutical companies seek to find additional ways to promote their products. One way is the promotion of drugs through the public media [16,17]. Since directives promulgated by the European Union forbid the advertising of prescription drugs to the general public [13], one sees that pharmaceutical companies attempt instead to win the interest of mass media journalists in passing on messages to a mass audience [15-16, 18-20]. Nelkin [19] has described the manner in which Lilly's drug for arthritis, Orflex, was marketed as news in the U.S.A: In 1982 the firm's public relations office sent out 6500 press kits promoting the drug. The product was covered as science news in 150 newspapers and television stations, and prescriptions increased from 2000 to 55000 a week. After some 12 weeks later, Orflex was withdrawn from the market because a report showed harmful side effects [19]; it seems likely that the scale on which these occurred was a direct consequence of the sudden and overwhelming introduction of the product [21].

More recently, the Glaxo company has been accused in the Netherlands of communicating with mass media journalists before the official approval of sumatriptan, a new anti-migraine drug (see Table 1). Not only in the Netherlands but also in France, sumatriptan received widespread coverage in the lay press ahead of its official approval for marketing. According to the French Drug Bulletin *Prescrire*, the articles in the lay press were part of a multimedia promotional campaign organized by Glaxo [22]. Glaxo replied that it is common and accepted practice for companies to communicate about the disease area in which they operate to ensure that the scientific and medical community are informed about medical pro-

Table 1

News coverage concerning sumatriptan. Messages in the printed mass media in the Netherlands,* October 1990 to January 1993

month	published in:	content of publication
(9-90 8th Migrain Trust International Symposium in London)		
10-90	newspaper, magazine	new drug against migraine, not yet available in the Netherlands, but awaiting approval
1-91	family magazine	new anti-migraine drug is very effective
(6-91 press conference organised by Glaxo about the approval of sumatriptan)		
6-91	newspapers	new medicine for the treatment of migraine
6-91	newspaper	criticism; too little is known about mechanisms of action, side effects.
8-91	newspaper	article about sumatriptan and its mechanism of action in the science section of a newspaper
8-91	family magazine	article about sumatriptan; less side effects than ergotamine
12-91	family magazine	article about antimigraine medication. Sumatriptan is a miracle cure
6-92	feminist magazine	Sumatriptan for migraine patients, side effects unknown
1-93	newspapers	heart failure in a woman after the use of sumatriptan

* articles about the cost of sumatriptan and the reimbursement are excluded.

gress. Journalists, it stated, had been informed about sumatriptan while attending a scientific meeting; they had not received information directly by Glaxo [23]. The mass publicity surrounding the launch of this drug and others led to discussions in the Dutch and French parliaments on the subject of what was clearly regarded as clandestine advertising [22,24]. It may be added however that this form of publicity does not cease with the licensing of the product, but can continue for some time afterwards, as prescribing begins; following the approval of sumatriptan in the Netherlands Glaxo organized a press conference which led to the appearance of further articles in newspapers and magazines.

Articles in newspapers and news items on television reach a very broad spectrum of people, naturally including health professionals, researchers and patients. Studies have shown that communication through the mass media is one of the means by which researchers become aware of interesting scientific publications [7] and physicians are alerted to new developments in treatment [5,6]. Not unexpectedly, negative publicity can markedly influence drug use as well. Jones et al showed a drastic decline in the use of the contraceptive "pill" after a sudden wave of negative publicity in the 1970s [25]. A study of Soumerai et al showed that both the professional and lay media were important channels of communication in alerting health professionals and parents about the relationship between aspirin and Reye's syndrome [26].

In this paper we explore the role of the lay press as a communication channel for pharmaceutical companies. The following ques-

tions are addressed: How influential is the provision of information about medicines directly to the public according to the pharmaceutical industry and what is the role of the lay press? Which methods are used by pharmaceutical companies to attract the attention of mass media journalists?

5.2

METHODS

To answer the questions defined above, we approached the public relations officers of the ten pharmaceutical firms with the highest sales figures in the Netherlands and requested an interview. Of these ten pharmaceutical companies, eight had a person specifically responsible for contacts with the press. We conducted in-depth interviews with seven of the eight; one respondent is missing because he was not available during the period of this research project. One company of Dutch origin was added; the remaining firms had their main seats abroad.

The interviews lasted one to two hours. They consisted of open questions regarding contacts with the press, as well as a number of statements to which the respondents were asked to react. These statements came from the literature and from interviews which we had previously conducted with journalists; their purpose was to elicit further information and views as to the way the press officers work, as well as an opinion as to the veracity of the statements. The interview topics and the use of the statements were pre-tested in a interview with the former P.R officer of a pharmaceutical company.

Guarantees for the anonymity of the respondents encouraged the freest possible reactions on sensitive issues. All interviews were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. The transcripts were analyzed by the first author using a theme-list, which was created after reading the transcripts and making use of the research questions. The information in the transcripts was first coded by using this theme-list; thereafter all the information obtained from all the respondents was analyzed per theme, looking for differences and similarities in the explanations given and the answers provided by the respondents.

5.3

RESULTS

According to the respondents, information to the general public has become progressively more important for two major reasons. Firstly, patients are becoming increasingly emancipated; the

respondents indicated that information is important in this emancipation process, *"Patients have a right to make their own choices"*. Secondly, the pharmaceutical industry has a weak public image. This image, in its view, has to be changed.

Patient emancipation

According to the respondents, pharmaceutical companies feel that they are justified in informing the public about certain preventable diseases and the means of dealing with them by using drugs. The examples given related to products used to treat or prevent hypertension or osteoporosis, drugs to relieve menopausal complaints, preparations to assist in the withdrawal of smoking, drugs to alleviate diabetes (and hence prevent its complications) and contraceptives. All such information is regarded as promoting the emancipation of the patient, i.e. his or her ability and wish to obtain and choose appropriate treatment. One respondent indicated that it is sometimes more efficient to communicate on such matters with a patients' association than through the general media.

Image of the pharmaceutical industry

Most respondents indicated that they perceived the image of their industry in the eyes of a lay audience to be neutral or absent, in the sense that the companies which they represent were seldom mentioned in the lay press. One respondent thought the public had a negative image of his company.

The image of the pharmaceutical industry as a whole is perceived as weak. *"The pharmaceutical industry is rich, earns too much money and medicines are expensive."* This image is considered by the respondents to be due to the fact that companies have not been very open in communicating with a lay audience. One respondent indicated that companies have been too arrogant in the past to talk to the general public. Another respondent stated that pharmaceutical companies have no experience in talking to a lay audience with regard to prescription drugs. According to certain of the respondents, the trade association should play a more active role to improve the industry's image.

Role of mass media journalists

The respondents confirmed that the mass media play an important role in the diffusion of information from the pharmaceutical industry towards the general public to improve both patient emancipation and the image of the industry. Journalists are supplied with information from the pharmaceutical industry because industry itself cannot address the public directly, particularly since public advertisements for prescription drugs are illegal.

Although health professionals may also obtain some of their information through the mass media, the respondents did not regard this as a significant reason for supplying journalists with information; health professionals are informed through the usual channels, e.g. drug company representatives. According to the respondents, physicians do not appreciate it when they are confronted with patients coming to the surgery with questions about a new drug before they themselves are informed about it. It seems, therefore, important to inform health professionals before journalists are given information.

Kind of information supplied by pharmaceutical companies

Information about drugs during development and before approval.

According to the respondents, pharmaceutical companies do not communicate major breakthroughs early in research to the press because the development of a new medicine takes between 10 and 15 years and only a few drugs undergoing investigations may in fact ever reach the market. Information about breakthroughs in research might therefore create false hopes. Sometimes information about experimental compounds which bear promise of becoming new drugs is published in newspapers or magazines but the respondents indicated that journalists did not get this kind of information directly from the company; their source of information on such matters was the scientific literature. One respondent did however indicate that when a promising drug is under development for a disease which is "difficult" to diagnose, and therefore perhaps often under-diagnosed, the company starts during the research stage to bring information on the disease to the attention of the physicians and journalists, so as to create disease awareness.

The respondents had different opinions as to possible effects of current media publicity on the regulatory authorities before and during the registration phase. Some respondents thought that publicity in the mass media about a promising new cure would have no effect at all on the regulatory process, while one respondent presumed a positive effect; two others, on the other hand, thought that there might be negative consequences for the approval procedure. One respondent in the latter category told us that he wrote a letter to the Regulatory authorities after publicity about a drug in the registration phase to point out that the company had nothing to do with the publicity in the mass media.

Newly approved drugs. According to the respondents, the press will be informed about a newly approved drug only in certain special cases. First of all the new drug must special in some way, having for example an entirely new active component, a new

mechanism of action or a completely new mode of application, or it must be a product of interest for a large lay audience in the Netherlands. To bring such a new product to the attention of the public serves two primary functions simultaneously: it informs the lay audience of the facts, and it benefits the company's image.

Where a newly marketed drug does not in fact represent a true innovation, some other event may be exploited to make the topic newsworthy and attract the attention of the press. The introduction may for example be combined with culmination of a newsworthy research project in the same field.

On occasion companies organise a press conference to introduce a new drug. To make the event even more newsworthy, experts speak at the press conference and answer questions. These experts, notably independent (clinical) researchers and medical doctors who have already used the new drug, are able to present the information in a more objective manner than could scientists or others from the company itself. The journalist receives a press kit after attending the press conference, either routinely or on request. Sometimes the introduction of a less spectacular new drug is accompanied by mailing a press kit to journalists only. Such a press kit usually contains a fully prepared press release, a product profile and sometimes quotations from experts and/or scientific papers.

Problems with drugs. According to most respondents, if something goes wrong with one of the company's products, the question of informing the press about it will depend on the nature of the problem which has arisen. If a recall procedure is necessary, the prescribers and pharmacists will first be informed and only after that (if at all) the national press. Most of the respondents indicated how clearly the decision to notify the mass media depended on the situation and the product. According to one of the respondents it is seldom necessary to use the mass media in order to inform the users of the drug about its withdrawal because the Dutch health care system is well organised and the pharmacist can trace and inform the users very easily, *"I would rather have a pharmacist informing a patient personally, than a patient reading it in the newspaper"*. If a recall procedure through health care professionals is not sufficient, for example if the problem concerns an OTC (i.e. free sale) product, the mass media provide the channel through which the users can be warned; in that case the companies will indeed inform the media.

All respondents indicated that in the event of a product recall they would be prepared to answer questions from journalists. In

their view it is important to honest and open. One of the respondents did however stress that *"if it is not necessary in terms of the safety of the users we do not inform the press, because it is always bad publicity. But if the press calls us, we will tell them what has happened"*.

Contacts initiated by pharmaceutical companies

Companies use different methods to inform journalists (Table 2). Personal contact is very important, according to all respondents, because "the journalists know you and can find you and the other way round, you know them and how to find them". To know each other breaks down barriers. However, one respondent warned against misusing such personal contact.

Table 2

Means used by pharmaceutical companies to inform journalists

Personal contact	interviews working visits small workshops
Invitations for scientific conferences	
Press conferences	very special events
Mailings	scientific papers annual reports specially prepared magazines press releases from international conferences

All the respondents invited journalists to events such as conference, a workshop or a working visit. Some of these events were specially organized for journalists. The respondents stressed that it is up to the journalists themselves to decide if they will visit the event and whether they will subsequently write about it. These invitations and meetings serve two different functions; specifically they serve to transmit information, but in a more general sense they enable the company to maintain contact with the journalists concerned.

Some respondents suggested a need for caution in such invitations to journalists: *"Journalists are swamped with invitations. If they accept your invitation and learn nothing new or useful they never come again and the relationship is spoiled"*.

Some of the respondents indicated that they preferred communicating with science or medical journalists because such journalists have more background information than, for example, general feature writers. One respondent noted that the circle of science writers in the Netherlands is very small and that this group gets very much information from different sources, making it difficult to attract their attention to any specific matter. Another respon-

dent preferred in some cases to talk to science writers from quality newspapers only.

Contacts initiated by journalists

Most of the respondents shared the opinion that journalists should contact the company more often, firstly since articles about their company or its products tended to appear in the press without the writer having consulted or checked his facts and interpretations, and secondly because the viewpoint of the pharmaceutical industry usually received too little attention.

Co-operation between companies and journalists/editors/publishers

Sometimes a collaboration exists between companies and journalists, editors or publishers. One respondent indicated that his firm financed an enclosure in a family magazine. This enclosure was prepared by the editors but paid for by the company and contained information about a particular group of medicines. The latter included not only preparations from the company itself but also drugs produced by its competitors. The enclosure was prepared as a form of patient education. Similarly two respondents informed us that they had financed the costs of a telephone line for answering questions about a disease and medication from readers of a particular article in a family magazine and people who had watched a T.V program on a certain subject.

A different form of collaboration which does exist, though it had not been experienced by our respondents themselves, is the advance mailing to physicians and pharmacists of an entire issue of a family magazine containing information about one or more medicines. This co-operation was the subject of varying opinions. Some of the respondents had a positive attitude because physicians and pharmacists are informed in advance about this publication which will be reaching their patients. Others had a negative attitude, considering that this should not be allowed and that something had to be done stop this form of mailing. One respondent said he would send the magazine only at the request of the pharmacist or physician. Others stated that health professionals do not appreciate this kind of mailing.

5.4

DISCUSSION

Information from the pharmaceutical industry to the general public has become increasingly extensive and emphatic. Pharmaceutical companies consider that it is important to inform a lay audience about their products and about the diseases for which they can be used. In this study two reasons were given to explain this increasing interest of pharmaceutical companies in a lay audience, i.e. the emancipation of patients and the desire of the industry to improve its weak public image. The first of these motives is reflected not only in the provision of data on drugs and treatments but also in the belief that one can should in some instances promote so-called disease awareness among the public. Various authors have pointed out that some campaigns conducted by industry in the U.S.A have focused on the need to increasing patient visits to the physician for under-diagnosed conditions [16,20]. In one advertising campaign, for example, it was stated that most of the people with a depression do not ask for professional help; it would be better for them if they in fact did seek professional assistance. Eli Lilly, the company selling the antidepressant Prozac,[®] in fact paid for these advertisements [20]. Information to a lay audience is sometimes an attempt to market a product directly to consumers [18]. If patients are aware that a new or better therapy now exists or that a disease can now be treated or prevented they can visit their physician and ask him or her to prescribe the product concerned; a so-called market-pull is thus created [27]. Direct marketing focused at patients offers good possibilities because the patients are emancipated and they might influence their physician who is thinking about giving them a prescription drug [28, 29]. Another argument to communicate with a lay audience is that, according to Spilker, "public opinion must be recognised and respected by the drug industry as an important force (...) because of the influence the public has on shaping new regulations and affecting drug-pricing policies .." [29].

There seems to be some consensus between our respondents about the correctness of informing the public about certain drugs available only on prescription, for example contraceptives, hormonal therapies to prevent osteoporosis, and antihypertensives. The lay press, both daily newspapers and family magazines, can play an important role in informing a lay audience about diseases and new or improved products. If the lay press pays attention to these products many potential 'users' can be reached. On the other

hand, there is a minority opinion that where patient groups are well organized it can more effectively supply their organizations with information. It is notable that this comment came from a respondent who has much contacts on a particular therapeutic area in which patients are well organized.

The respondents in our study all work for large and innovative pharmaceutical companies. From the point of view of these companies different types of newsworthy events can be distinguished. First of all a major "breakthrough" in the research department might be considered newsworthy. The respondents indicate, however, that early "breakthroughs" in research are not communicated directly to mass media journalists because publicity might create false hopes about promising new cures not (yet) available. Given the uncertainty and equivocality of product development, and the long period needed for scientific and technical development there is a concern within companies not to make premature claims [29].

However, articles do appear in newspapers on a new drug still in the research phase. Some of these may be based on information obtained directly from the scientific literature, but where they relate to a product approaching the stage of approval and introduction they may reflect information sent to journalists by the company. The former type of newspaper article may for example devote attention to the initiation of research in humans, to study the drugs' effectiveness [30]. The latter type is more commonly devoted to drugs which are already approaching the point of final assessment. However there are exceptions; we encountered in one of the magazines an article about an entirely new type of oral contraceptive, not yet approved, on which human research was still apparently in an indecisive phase; in this article women were called up to enter a study with this new drug [31]. These exceptional cases related to small firms on the periphery of the pharmaceutical industry.

When an innovative medicine is approved, a press conference is sometimes organized. It appears to be common, on such an occasion, to invite independent scientists and physicians to give information about the new product to the journalists who attend. Because science journalists have a sceptical attitude towards information coming directly from the industry [8], it is considered more effective for companies to let non-industry experts provide the journalists with information. "If I can find a scientist at the University of Toronto to say that this product has fewer known health hazards than the existing products ..[.] it is a better thing" [32].

Another newsworthy event might be when something goes wrong with the company or one of its products. In general, it depends on the kind of problem whether the press will be informed by the company itself. All respondents indicate that they were prepared to answer questions from the press, though one pointed to a preference for relying on the professional health care system to inform users of the product concerned. Sturkenboom et al. show, however, that the mass media do play an important role in warning the users of a prescription drug quickly, and that not all users can be traced and will be informed through the health care professionals, even in the Netherlands where health care is intensive and well organised [33]. On a matter such as this, one must bear in mind that the results of this study are based on interviews with the public relation officers of pharmaceutical companies; although we did guarantee the respondents anonymity, there might have been a tendency to provide socially desirable answers.

Sometimes pharmaceutical companies "warn" physicians and pharmacists that questions about a particular prescription drug can be expected because a television program or family magazine will pay attention to the drug or its indication [34,35]. Wyeth, for example, sent to all family physicians in the Netherlands an issue of a family magazine in which hormonal therapy for menopausal complaints was discussed [36]. In the accompanying letter the marketing planning manager wrote that the publication of this issue coincided with the introduction of their new hormonal product, and that questions from patients could be expected. Family magazines and pharmaceutical companies sometimes co-operate; a company may finance an enclosure about an illness or a drug, or organise a telephone answering service [37].

The results of this study show that pharmaceutical companies do approach mass media journalists with information about products in various ways at different moments. The respondents indicate that they are both cautious and selective in the information they communicate because of their responsibility towards the general public and their relationship with journalists.

Journalists working for daily newspapers claim to be critical because they realise that the information coming from the pharmaceutical industry may be one-sided. Even if the information which companies send is of itself sound and reliable, one is unlikely to know what information is being withheld. It is notable that in most newspaper articles in which a pharmaceutical company is mentioned another source is cited as well [8].

Information from the pharmaceutical industry to the general public has become more extensive and emphatic. As long as independent and critical journalists and editors decide for themselves whether information about drugs coming from pharmaceutical companies is newsworthy enough to be published, what reaches the printed page is likely to be genuine news and not hidden advertising. Journalists should make very clear to the reader which sources have been used to compile the article, so that he can himself decide whether he wishes to regard the information as reliable.

Although Chetley [15] questions the implementation of ethical codes, we would welcome a decision to apply the rules of conduct of the pharmaceutical industry, with respect to the information about drugs, hospitality and gifts (as described in the "European Code of Practice for the Promotion of Medicines" [12]) not only to the relationship between companies and health professionals but also to their relationship with mass media journalists.

Finally, it is clear that information to the public on prescription drugs will never be more than secondary to the information which goes to doctors and pharmacists. The basis for sound drug use will be the proper information of health care professionals about the latest developments and new drugs, whether the information be favourable or otherwise. They should be able to educate their patients about the pros and cons of a particular therapy. Patients who ask for (new) drugs in response to mass media publicity may know exactly the name and supposed merits of the drug but at the same time they may be uninformed as to its possible side-effects, interactions and contraindications.

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