

HEALTH INFORMATION

A clear division of roles is needed to protect public health

Pharmaceutical companies have initiated many campaigns to advertise medicines directly to patients and consumers. These are varied and recurrent and take many different forms, from lobbying at all levels of European and national policy development, to setting up convenient “patient groups”, and inventing services and campaigns such as so-called “compliance support” programmes to promote patients’ adherence to therapy.

Everyone has a role to play. The various actors involved in health care are easily identified: patients/citizens, either individually or collectively through patients’ associations, health professionals, government agencies, and the healthcare industries. The citizens who become patients due to a temporary or permanent deterioration in their health are at the centre of this equation. Even when they are constrained by illness, their ability to make treatment decisions must be preserved. It is up to patients/citizens to choose what they consider to be the most suitable care and to question treatment decisions whenever necessary, depending on the disease’s progression, their own response to their evolving condition, their priorities at a given point in time, etc.

Patients must safeguard the freedom to act on their health, to decide when to take a drug or not, or to pursue or stop treatment. In order to make these decisions, they need access to impartial information on what they can and cannot expect from treatment.

Associations of patients that are set up by patients themselves and are able to resist intrusion by the pharmaceutical industry can help to provide appropriate information.

The role of health professionals is to act as assistants and advisors, to encourage patients to exercise this freedom and to provide support in a respectful manner, while being closely attuned to patients’ social and cultural circumstances and health condition. It is their professional responsibility to

supply patients with the comparative information they need to make up their own minds.

It is up to government agencies to enable health professionals to fulfil this task as well as possible by facilitating, among other things, access to objective information on illnesses and their treatment. To do this, they must remain impervious to the pressures of specific interest groups demanding to be allowed to disseminate their own “communications”, and thus maintain a focus on public health and the public interest. It is up to them as well to guarantee equal access to all to drugs that are effective and thoroughly evaluated.

It is up to the healthcare industries to produce drugs and medical devices, and make them available to health professionals and patients, which have a well-established balance of benefit versus harm and safe administration procedures.

A clear division of roles is needed to protect public health. Confusions of roles and conflicts of interest between these different actors are likely to damage the quality of care. At risk, ultimately, is patients’ freedom to make the best possible treatment choices depending on their individual needs.

That is why the Medicines in Europe Forum together with the International Society of Drug Bulletins, Health Action International Europe and others are resolutely committed to this struggle to defend public health.



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The Medicines in Europe Forum (MiEF), launched in March 2002, covers 12 European Member States. It includes more than 70 member organizations representing the four key players on the health field, i.e. patients groups, family and consumer bodies, social security systems, and health professionals. Such a grouping is unique in the history of the EU, and it certainly reflects the important stakes and expectations regarding European medicines policy. Admittedly, medicines are no simple consumer goods, and the Union represents an opportunity for European citizens when it comes to guarantees of efficacy, safety and pricing.



The International Society of Drug Bulletins (ISDB), founded in 1986, is a world wide Network of bulletins and journals on drugs and therapeutics that are financially and intellectually independent of pharmaceutical industry. Currently, their members include 57 members in 35 countries around the world. More info: www.isdbweb.org



Health Action International (HAI) is an independent global network of health, consumer and development organisations working to increase access to essential medicines and improve rational use. More info: www.haiweb.org