

Press Release -- For Immediate Release
May 05, 2003

Newspapers highlight benefits of new drugs, ignore risks

Consumers aren't getting balanced information about new prescription drugs, says CCPA

(Vancouver) The information Canadians get on new prescription drugs from a major and trusted source of information-daily newspapers-is incomplete and may promote unrealistic expectations about the benefits of new drugs. This is the troubling finding of a study released today by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. The first of its kind in Canada, the study examines stories in Canada's 24 largest daily newspapers about five major prescriptions drugs launched in recent years.

"Canadians are bombarded daily by media stories about new medicines," says Alan Cassels, a CCPA research associate and the study's lead author. "When we as consumers, doctors or policy makers pick up the morning paper to get the lowdown on the latest breakthrough drug, it is absolutely critical that we get a balanced and complete picture. Unfortunately, the quality of information provided in news reports is often poor."

Drugs in the News: How well do Canadian newspapers report the good, the bad and the ugly of new prescription drugs finds that newspaper articles more often emphasize the benefits of new drugs, while little attention is paid to possible harms. Sixty eight percent of the articles examined made no mention whatsoever of possible adverse effects, and when identified, these harms were usually downplayed and mentioned towards the end of the article.

The study also finds that:

- a.. The health effects of drugs are often presented using only descriptive terms, without also providing precise or scientific information about the drug's effectiveness.
- b.. Basic information that quantified the benefits or harms of the drugs was reported in only one out of every four articles-and when it was provided, 30 percent of the time it was presented in misleading terms.
- c.. When possible harmful effects were mentioned, they were more often described with language that downplayed the risk to patients ("minor" or "rare"), while benefits were more often described using language that emphasized the potential benefit ("proven remedy" or "highly effective").

d.. Contraindications-those conditions under which it is not safe to take the drugs-were mentioned in only 4 percent of the articles.

e.. Only one in six articles mentioned alternative treatment options (for example, an existing, cheaper drug).

f.. The financial interests at work behind the scenes-such as who funded a study about a drug's effectiveness, or the financial relationship of a patient spokesperson to the drug company-were noted less than 3 percent of the time.

"Given the importance of a sustainable health care system to the Canadian public, and the increasing share of public health dollars that drugs consume, good and complete information is vital," says James McCormack, a professor in the Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences at UBC and co-author of the study. "One of the side effects of incomplete reporting on drugs is that it can lead to wider use than is warranted. Consumers may ask their doctors to prescribe particular new drugs, or pressure policy makers into covering new drugs, even if they are no more effective than existing therapies."

The study's authors agree, however, that reporting on pharmaceuticals isn't easy for journalists. "It requires an ability to interpret complex scientific information while resisting the pharmaceutical industry's aggressive marketing techniques," says Barbara Mintzes, co-author of the study. "Pharmaceutical companies make it very easy to write favourable stories about new drugs, while independent drug information is harder to find."

Dr. Joel Lexchin, an emergency department physician in Toronto and associate professor in the School of Health Policy and Management at York University, says he hopes the study will help journalists when they report on new medications. "The media needs to do a better job of following the money so that readers can be better informed."

The study includes a journalist's guide to covering prescription drugs, as well as list of independent sources of drug information.

The complete study is available at www.policyalternatives.ca or by calling the CCPA office at 604-801-5121. An article based on the study will also be the cover story in the April 29 issue of the Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ).

For media interviews, call Shannon Daub at 604-801-5509.

Funding for this research was provided by the Office of Consumer Affairs of

Industry Canada.