Opponents of DTCA need the objectivity they expect of advertisers

In their letter ‘Direct-to-consumer advertising is more profitable if it is misleading (http://www.nzma.org.nz/journal/116-1182/610/),’ Mansfield and Mintzes suggest that GlaxoSmithKline is ‘genuinely unaware that their advertising is misleading’. I was disappointed by inaccuracies in their letter. GSK is very conscious of the need for rigour in the advertising approval process.

The authors have three specific criticisms regarding the current advertising of Flixotide:

- That it creates a misleading impression of effectiveness by using subjective improvement rates without a comparison group. These statements are clearly referenced in the body of the advertisement to ACNeilsen Consumer Market Research. Their research is conducted to Market Research Society of NZ standards. This is something consumers are aware of in terms of both who the company is and the nature of market research. As such, this represents legitimate data for use in this medium.

- That the advertisement does not explain Flixotide is more expensive than appropriate doses of the alternatives. This irrelevant given that Flixotide is the same price as other inhaled corticosteroids(ICS) and has a substantial body of evidence for improved outcomes.3,4

- That it fails to disclose the uncertainty regarding whether or not Flixotide’s higher bioavailability may lead to more long-term adverse effects. The authors ignore the body of evidence and concentrate on only one paper, Lipworth, published in 1999.5 This is a meta-analysis up to 1998, containing several studies on systemic effects of ICS in healthy volunteers. Given that the systemic activity of fluticasone is at least twofold greater in healthy volunteers than in subjects with asthma,3 the inclusion of healthy volunteers in such studies is dubious methodology and findings relate only to the population investigated. This paper does not concur with the body of evidence represented in sources of peer-reviewed meta-analysis, such as Cochrane.4

The authors appear to be genuinely unaware that they are doing exactly what they accuse the advertising companies of: selectively presenting information biased to support their own view on DTCA.

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References:


