



## Advertising Prescription Drugs on TV... Hazardous or Beneficial?

By LOUIS LASAGNA, M.D.

**B**oots Pharmaceutical, Inc., recently brodeground when it began airing television commercials comparing the price of its brand of hypotensives to that of its competitor. The ads don't counsel patients to seek the product treatment—they tell those already taking the drug that they may be able to save some money by switching to the firm's preparation. The Boots ad campaign is currently limited to the Tampa area, and the Food and Drug Administration has requested a moratorium on the introduction of any new consumer-oriented advertisements by any manufacturer until the votes are counted. Does this move protect the public from a potentially irresponsible practice? Or, does it infringe on the public's right to know?

I think it is possible to make a convincing case for either side. The most important potential benefit that I can think of is that consumer advertisements will alert patients to the possibility that they might be helped by the various drugs advertised.

Some patients are becoming increasingly disinclined to participate in decisions concerning their health care. They want more information on the therapeutic options available, and they would no doubt assert that they have a right to see these commercials.

Yet the myriad economic ramifications of pharmaceutical advertising campaigns cannot be ignored. Patients who now see their doctors only occasionally may begin scheduling more frequent appointments in their eagerness to pursue each new therapeutic option and, possibly, to obtain a prescription. I doubt that third-party payers would support this trend. True, in the long run, early diagnosis, treatment, and prophylaxis may ultimately prevent more serious and costly conditions from developing. In the short term, however, I have a feeling that greater public awareness from these commercials will increase health care costs.

The patient, however, could save money as the result of such cost-comparison commercials as those being aired by Boots. But let's leave individual savings aside—for a moment—and consider the overall economic impact should more and more pharmaceutical firms launch consumer ad campaigns.

For the first few firms airing commercials, the resulting increase in sales will probably offset production fees and the cost of air time. However, as the other firms begin airing commercials to protect their share of the market, these gains will level off. At this point, you will have several pharmaceutical manufacturers competing for air time, with all of them afraid to stop advertising. It seems inevitable that consumers will ultimately bear the lion's share of these advertising costs.

More to the point, I'm not at all convinced that this is the best forum for educating the public. It seems to me that the best a manufacturer could do is link his product with a symptom or disease.

Another valid concern is the potentially far-reaching ramifications of prematurely advertising certain drugs. Imagine what might have happened, say, if benzocaine (Orajel, Lilly), had been widely advertised to the general public. Certainly, commercials must be truthful and not make extravagant claims.

Most drugs can kill people, period. This is one of the reasons the pharmaceutical field is so closely monitored by the FDA. But does the potential for hazard warrant shielding the public from learning about these therapeutic agents? I'm not convinced. In fact, I really don't see how anyone can argue that ethical drugs should be subjected to more stringent controls than over-the-counter preparations, which are freely advertised and readily available to the public.

I certainly favor monitoring consumer-oriented advertising campaigns—we must, because the potential for harm is simply too real not to keep track of this process. However, I believe just as strongly that if patients want information, they're going to get it.

So there you have it. The pros and cons of advertising drugs directly to consumers is really sort of a social debate between paternalism and libertarianism. If you believe that the general public can't be trusted to act responsibly, these ads could be a potential hazard. If you feel that patients are smarter than some may think—and have a right to make their own mistakes—then you probably view this as a positive development.

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