Direct-to-consumer Advertising of Prescription Drugs: Raising the Quality of Health Care

Over the past few decades, direct-to-consumer advertising has become a heated public issue among critics, physicians, and patients. In today’s society, it is nearly impossible to flip through a magazine or watch television without encountering some sort of prescription drug advertising. While many view direct-to-consumer advertising of prescription drugs as a deleterious factor which disrupts patient-physician relations and leads to inaccurate prescriptions, proponents view such advertising as a beneficial resource which raises the general quality of health care. Direct-to-consumer advertising of prescription drugs improves general health care by providing patients with a credible source of information which motivates them to pursue an active role in their personal health and forces doctors to remain updated in their fields.

Just over the past couple of years, the amount of revenue spent on direct-to-consumer advertising (DTCA) of prescription drugs has increased dramatically. Julie Donohue, a Harvard graduate with her Ph. D. in health policy, currently serves as an Assistant Professor of Health Policy and Management in the Graduate School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh. Donohue claims that the revolution in information technology has also significantly expanded the number of consumers seeking health information and support from sources other than their physicians (Donohue). As the world of television entertainment continues to expand, these DTC advertisements continue to broaden their audiences and increase their profits, reaching millions of people across the United States. Mollyann Brodie and Larry Levitt, members of the Kaiser Family Foundation, which is dedicated to health policy issues, reported that total promotional spending by drug makers increased in the United States from 9.2 billion in 1996 to 15.7 billion in 2000 resulting largely from the growth in television advertising (Brodie). Due to increased DTC advertising of prescription drugs, more consumers are motivated to inquire about the specific
drugs they see on television, causing drug companies to profit from the increase in prescriptions. As a result, opponents have come to view these adds as a means of exploiting the pockets of naive consumers and believe that they disrupt the patient physician relationship. However, these adds only function as a positive addition to the knowledge of the physician which can actually improve the patient-physician relationship.

Direct-to-consumer advertising of prescription drugs can be viewed as a medium through which consumers are able to learn about possible treatment opportunities to various diseases and illnesses prior to visiting their doctors. Leonard Weber, former President of the Medical Resource Network of Michigan and current health care ethics consultant, claims that DTCA allows consumers to obtain information about the availability of specific medications that might be appropriate for their treatment so that they can consult their doctors about these medications (Weber 161). The direct-to-consumer advertising of prescription drugs presents itself in a relatable, colloquial manner which leaves out the intimidating medical jargon that many consumers ignore. Communications professors Huh Jisu, Denise DeLorme, and Leonard Reid argue that DTC advertising of prescription drugs “empowers consumers by improving their understanding of health-related subjects and their ability to actively participate in health care” (Jisu). These advertisements are directed towards an American audience without a medical school degree and are able to educate consumers in a way they can comprehend. The market of prescription drugs is constantly expanding, and for the average patient, it is difficult to stay updated with the latest treatments. Direct-to-consumer advertising acts as an intermediate between patients and physicians as it allows patients to have a basis of education before they see their doctors, encouraging patients to be more independent when it comes to their health.
Patient independence promoted by the DTC advertising of prescription drugs motivates patients to take control of their health and the possible treatments available to them in the drug market. Rebecca J. Welch Cline, who has a Ph.D in Communication and Behavioral Oncology, and Henry Young, who holds a Ph.D in Pharmacy Administration, claim that the DTC advertising of prescription drugs enhances consumers’ understanding of their health, motivates their learning, and empowers them to play a more active role in their treatment by initiating discussions, showing interest, and asking questions (Cline). Television advertisements also allow patients to receive health information in a private and anonymous way that can encourage a patient to feel more comfortable and knowledgeable before a doctor’s appointment. However, DTC advertising does not replace the physician-patient relationship, but instead encourages an informed discussion (Weber 161). If a patient is able to come into an appointment already having a foundation of knowledge on his or her illness and possible treatments, they can assume a more active role and get more out of their appointment. In 1998 Prevention Magazine and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) conducted a national survey and found that direct-to-consumer advertising “encouraged a projected 21.2 million consumers to talk with their doctor about a medical condition or illness they had never talked with their doctor about before seeing an advertisement” (Holmer 381). These numbers have continued to increased over the past decade in accordance with the expanding realm of television drug advertising. Some consumers may not even be aware of the possibility that they could have a specific problem until they see an advertisement. Patients are further encouraged by the fact that these advertisements are a reliable source of information, which prompts them to have more confidence in their doctors’ orders.

Prescription drug advertisements operate in a manner which raises the ethos of a specific medication and allows patients to consider another opinion in addition to their physician.
Associate Professor of Business Ethics at the Rutgers Business School, Michael Santoro, and Corporate Vice President of Johnson & Johnson, Thomas Gorrie, argue that DTCA “has the potential to improve adherence to medication therapy which for chronic conditions such as diabetes, depression, and hyperlipidemia is a significant public health problem (177). The more frequently advertised drugs attain a higher level of ethos as their names become more popular and familiar to the average consumers. When consumers see the drugs they are taking advertised on television, they are able to establish a higher level of confidence in their doctors and their medications. Alan Holme, a director on the board of Inspire Pharmaceuticals Incorporated, claims that “consumers who have seen advertisements for medicines they are currently taking say the advertising makes them feel better about the medicine they’re taking, makes them more likely to take it and reminds them to have their prescriptions refilled” (Holmer 382). The average patient does not have the financial means to consult multiple doctors for various opinions. It is difficult for a patient to put their trust in the hands one one doctor, especially for those who are not completely educated on the fine print of their prescriptions. Direct-to-consumer advertisements relate to the patient in a way which allows them to decipher the fine print and gain confidence by viewing the success stories of others on the same medication. While direct-to-consumer advertisements are successful in giving patients a confidence boost, it is questioned whether a success story alone can deliver enough information.

Many opponents of DTC advertising claim that the advertisements omit a lot of important facts. However, these advertisements must adhere to specific Federal Drug Administration (FDA) requirements such as the inclusion of the drug name, use, a major statement, adverse effects, and contraindications (Kaphingst). According to the FDA, these advertisements cannot be false or misleading and must have a balance in the presentation of respective risks and
benefits (Kaphingst). Kimberly Kaphingst, a member of the Social and Behavioral Research Branch and the National Human Genome Research Institute conducted a study in which she focused on product-specific advertisements on the three major networks of ABC, CBS, and NBC and analyzed the advertisements for their quality and presentation of information (Kaphingst). Kaphingst found that most ads did not use techniques such as changes in speed, tone, or volume to offset the side effects as indicated by many opponents (Kaphingst). In fact, all of the commercials viewed also referenced additional sources of product information such as websites, print ads, and toll-free numbers (Kaphingst). This study indicates that the majority of these advertisements are adhering to their specific guidelines in regulation with the FDA and can be considered a credible source of information which can encourage patients to listen to their doctors and improve the health care system.

Direct-to-consumer advertising of prescription drugs improves the general quality of health care by forcing doctors to stay educated and up to date in the most recent treatments in their fields and reducing the death rates to some of the highest killing diseases. With new treatments and drug therapies hitting the market and advertised over television each month, doctors are pressured to stay up to date in their fields. As patients become increasingly educated after consulting these DTC advertisements, their physicians must stay one step ahead of them. In fact, over 53 million consumers talked to their physicians about a medication they saw advertised (Holmer 381). It would be humiliating for patients to consult their physicians and have a greater knowledge on a specific treatment than their own doctors. As a result, the quality of health care increases as physicians are pressured into competing with these advertisements to remain the number one source of information for patients.
Highly educated and innovative physicians are key to combating many potentially life-threatening illnesses. Millions of Americans die each year from undiagnosed cases of diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and heart disease (Holmer 381). By educating their consumers, DTC advertisements are decreasing the death rates resulting from such undiagnosed illnesses by offering various treatments and motivating patients to consult their doctors. Many of these illnesses can be easily treated or managed with prescription drugs. However, the consequences of not seeking appropriate treatment can be dire as “unchecked high cholesterol levels can lead to heart attack or stroke, while cholesterol-lowering drugs can cut this risk by about 30.9%” (Holmer 382). In addition, “failure to treat depression can result in suicide, and high blood pressure can lead to stroke, heart attacks, and kidney failure” (Holmer 382). By educating consumers and motivating them to inquire about treatments from their physicians through DTC advertising, drug companies are severely decreasing the death rates to some of the top killing diseases in America.

When it comes to direct-to-consumer advertising of prescription drugs, the media is not the enemy. Just over the past few decades, DTC advertisements have played a dominant role in improving the quality of health care by educating patients and helping to improve the relationship between patients and their physicians. When consumers view these prescription drug advertisements, they are presented with an outside, non-judgmental source of information which can encourage them to consult their physicians and make them more comfortable in doing so. While opponents view DTC advertising of prescription drugs as a pervasive means of profit, the positive effects these advertisements have had on Americans and the health system is undeniable. Just over the past few decades, the general quality of health care has increased, as patients have
developed not only a newfound independence when it comes to their personal health, but a stronger relationship with their physician.
Work Cited


