



Opinion

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Science and Society - Medicine and Media

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The public's interest in health matters is growing more and more in parallel with the development of technology, the spread of media and mainly with the spread of the Internet. The increase in public interest is also evidenced by health inserts published by print media, regular health columns by journalists and doctors, health broadcasts on radio and television, specialized medical information portals, patient communities that are created on the Internet and present explosive growth.

This information, whether the health editors seek it or not, shapes the public's perception of the health issues to which the specific information refers. We should emphasize the fact that people suffering from a chronic disease or their relatives are mainly the social sample that insists on searching for medical news or related information. But the media do not simply convey news, but the way, the time, the place they are reported and the terminology/vocabulary they use as well as the comments play a very important role in the public's perception of whether the issue presented is really serious or whether ultimately it can be a threat to the life of the patient concerned (listener-reader-viewer). But the question is: Do the mass media provide correct information on health issues?

University researcher *Dr Ray Moynihan* in his book published in English entitled *Selling sickness: How drug companies are turning us into patients* presents an analysis of 207 articles in print media and television regarding the presentation of medicines. Of the 207, 83 articles had not quantified the expected benefits of the drugs and of the 124 that had quantified them, only 18 had presented the relative and absolute benefits. Of all the news, 53% had no information about the side effects and 70% did not even mention the cost. Of the 170 news stories that reported the name of a clinical trial investigator, 85 (50%) reported at least one financial relationship with the company that manufactured the featured drug.

The internationally accepted criteria for the adequacy and credibility of a health news story are clearly commented by the renou-

ned researcher in this field Gary Schwitzer and are as follows: 1) mention of the cost 2) mention of a relative and absolute indication of the treatment 3) mention of the benefits 4) full reporting of side effects 5) reporting of other similar drugs or methods 6) reporting of conflicts of interest 7) reporting of independent sources or objective commentators 8) avoiding plagiarism of supposed diseases that are often common-normal conditions (eg. labour, birth, pregnancy, headache, malaise, baldness) (this is internationally called disease mongering 9) the reference to the methodology 10) the reference to the pioneering of the technique or the drug 11) the commercial availability.

Attention must be paid to the way in which the following "sly" words are used by the media, for example: treatment, dangerous-n, effective-n, cheap, expensive, mortality, morbidity, complication, side effect, adverse effect, experimental animal (it must be specified whether they are human subjects or experimental animals). We should also refer to the public panic caused by announcements of pandemics (diseases of the media) of the H1N1 (2009) type of swine flu, which was also a recent international scandal in which, unfortunately, the World Health Organization is allegedly involved. Media panic led to unprecedented mass buying of vaccines and overdiagnosis which then led to mass demand for unnecessary medical services for the benefit of the medical product market.

The media often support the creation of "new diseases" and the labeling of "disease" in mild conditions or variants of normal conditions which, however, do not inspire concern and do not threaten the patient's life. These common conditions become the cause of regular and unnecessary visits to doctors, lead to wasted diagnostic tests and to polypharmacy (e.g. the small prolapse of the mitral valve of the heart, the usual skin moles in the context of fear of transformation into cancer, thyroid nodules, fatty liver, osteoporosis, etc.). Drug advertisements in print and electronic media often terrify the public because of the way they are presented, in fact the massive and uncontrolled advertising of drugs and health services



has met the resistance of Medical Associations, but unfortunately the phenomenon continues without any obstacle.

In the final analysis, when the media meet the criteria of adequate and responsible information in health matters, then it is proven that they can, on the one hand, help to gain further trust in the treating doctor, and on the other hand, to further expand the knowledge of patients and their relatives on a serious health problem. In addition, the mass media and especially the internet have contri-

buted to the increase of communication between people suffering from the same disease, resulting in the strengthening of solidarity and support of homoeopathic social groups. It is self-evident that the mass media cannot replace, either diagnostically or therapeutically, the attending physician who is also the essential filter of all information provided to society by the media.