

Consumer drug advertising leads to MD backlash in Holland

After growing tired of having patients ask for an oral treatment for their discoloured toenails, 3 Dutch family physicians decided to fight back by using the same medium that brought them the patients. Not only did they send a letter to a Dutch medical journal calling for a boycott of the drug company that was responsible, but they also issued the same call in a televised interview.

The doctors were left fuming by a month-long advertising campaign that they say encouraged Dutch television viewers to use terbinafine (Lamisil), an antifungal treatment for onychomycosis and skin infections. The advertisement did not name the product, which is manufactured by Novartis, but it is the only drug of its type.

The letter calling for a boycott appeared in June in *Medisch Contact*, published by the Royal Dutch Society of Medicine. The physicians argued that a “a full and national boycott” might force the company “to act in a more responsible manner.” They also appeared on the television program *2Vandaag* in July.

Dr. Remon Hendriksen says the main reason for their action is the time the ads force physicians to spend trying to talk patients out of taking an inappropriate drug. “Novartis is unnecessarily scaring people into seeing their doctors,” he told *CMAJ*. “It is very easy to scare people but it is much harder to explain to them what is appropriate treatment.” (In May 2001, the US Food and Drug Administration issued a public health advisory about terbinafine because of 16 possible cases of liver failure associated with it [www.fda.gov/cder/drug/advisory/sporanox-lamisil/qa.htm]).

Despite the physicians’ objections, a Dutch judge recently ruled that the advertisement does not violate Dutch law because no drug was named. Canada and the Netherlands have similar laws banning outright direct-to-consumer (DTC) advertising. Health Canada has received complaints about DTC advertising for 2 drugs marketed here, sildenafil and bupropion (see *CMAJ* 2001;165[4]:462).

This is not the first time Dutch physicians have challenged DTC advertising. In 2000, a letter in the same medical journal from a group of GPs criti-

cized the pharmaceutical industry for directing its marketing toward consumers and asked that physicians “protest en masse against this form of medicine propaganda.”

Novartis spokesperson Patricia Klijvan Rossum says that a “boycott at the expense of patients is unworthy of the medical profession.” In a written statement, she said the “information campaign” is permissible by law and may even “move all of the patients being

treated with a product from our firm to another product.”

The protesting doctors hope the boycott forces physicians to consider how DTC advertising can create fear in patients and result in inappropriate visits to physicians. This fall, ministers of the European Parliament will be debating and voting on changes to European Union laws that restrict DTC advertising of prescription drugs. — *Alan Cassels, Victoria*

DISPATCHES

South African brain drain costing \$5 billion — and counting

The flight of South Africa’s medical professionals seems unending, despite the country’s pleas for rich countries to stop poaching its doctors and nurses (*CMAJ* 2001;164[3]:387-8). This year the number of South Africa-trained physicians practising in Canada has risen by 174, to 1738. Many more have left for the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and the US.

The exodus, which is largely driven by a burgeoning crime rate and problems within the health care system, has also been encouraged by an economic downturn. In 2001 the rand plummeted by 30% against the US dollar before rebounding somewhat this year.

The *South African Health Review* reports that the public sector’s doctor-patient ratio declined from 21.9 physicians per 100 000 people in 2000 to 19.8 per 100 000 in 2001. The ratio for nurses also shrank, from 120.3 per 100 000 in 2000 to 111.9 per 100 000 last year.

An estimated 20 000 professionals flee Africa annually, a brain drain that costs billions; about 10 000 South Africans emigrate annually, half of them professionals.

Researchers at the University of Cape Town researchers argue that the brain drain in South Africa is more significant than the government admits (www.queensu.ca/samp/Publications.html). Their study tallied 41 496 professional emigrants from South Africa between 1989 and 1997 — almost 4 times more than the official figure of 11 255. “The analysis clearly shows that there is significant official underestimation of the extent of South Africa’s brain drain,” authors Mercy Brown and colleagues conclude. Neither figure includes the many young South Africans who never officially emigrate, but simply leave the country a few years after graduating and never return. The authors refer to the exodus as the “skilled South African diaspora.”

The International Organization for Migration says the cost to South Africa has been more than \$5 billion in “lost human capital” since 1997.

The South African government was pushing to put the brain-drain issue on the agenda of the World Summit of Sustainable Development, scheduled for Johannesburg this summer. “We must really have a pact on this between north and south,” Finance Minister Trevor Manuel says. “We need to retain our doctors.” — *Colin McClelland, Johannesburg*