

Drug ads can be harmful to your health

We've all seen those slick ads for prescription medications, some featuring celebrity spokespersons. By aiming their pitches squarely at consumers, these TV, radio, print and online advertisements raise hopes of a lower cholesterol count, an end to pattern baldness and an invigorated sex life.

This increasingly common -- and often profitable -- method of reaching consumers may appear benign, but a new study published in the *Health Affairs* medical journal raises questions about possible adverse impacts on clinical care.

The study questions whether the ads serve the promotional interests of drug companies at the expense of public health needs.

"Direct-to-consumer (DTC) advertising has the potential to fundamentally alter the roles of doctor and patient," according to the study's lead author, Dr. Michael Wilkes, an associate professor of medicine at the University of California-Los Angeles.

"At best, this transformation will create better informed patients, ready to take an active role in setting and reaching their own health goals. At worst, we will have a world of aggressive, distrustful and only partially informed patients and cowed physicians."

Dr. Wilkes pointed out that primary care physicians, who treat the majority of conditions targeted by DTC ads, typically hold negative opinions of such promotions. The most common complaints, he said, involve ads increasing drug costs and presenting misleading and biased views.

Physicians also worry that ads strain patient/provider relationships, contort the physician's professional role and lead to inappropriate prescribing.

"A major concern is that DTC advertising rarely mentions lifestyle changes or other non-pharmacological interventions, which often are as important as pharmacological therapy," Wilkes said. "This may cultivate the belief among the public that there is a pill for every ill and lead to an even more overmedicated society."

Sadly, DTC drug advertising appears here to stay. Drug companies spent \$905 million on such ads in the first half of 1999 alone.

Wilkes and his colleagues in the study suggested that Congress fund studies into the impact of DTC drug advertising and how these ads effect healthcare costs and the quality of prescribing, the researchers said.

"The long-term effects of DTC advertising on the health of patients and the well-being of the healthcare establishment will require extensive investigation," Wilkes said. "But such investments are worthwhile, given the enormous public health stakes as well as the huge sums of money involved."

SOURCES: "Direct-to-consumer prescription drug advertising has negative implications for clinical care, new study finds," University of California, Los Angeles Health Sciences, Mar. 7, 2000.