Reviewer's report

Title: A cross-sectional evidence-based review of pharmaceutical promotional marketing advertisements and their underlying studies: Is what they tell us important and true?

Version: 1 Date: 18 December 2005

Reviewer: Joel Lexchin

Reviewer's report:

General

This paper explores the value of studies that pharmaceutical companies use to support information that they distribute to general practitioners. As such it draws on and supplements previous work that has been done in this area. The message from this study is not unique but it does explore the issue from a slightly different perspective and therefore adds value to what has been previously found. However, as it stands there are major revisions that are necessary before this paper could be published.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

There are three significant areas where this paper needs revisions:

1. The authors need to cite previous similar work and discuss their study in light of this previous material. Specifically they should look at Lexchin et al. CMAJ 1994151:47-54 and Cooper et al. CMAJ 2005;172:487-91.

2. There are a number of areas where things are unclear or where the authors have not adequately explained what they intend to do:

Page 6, first paragraph:

Although the authors give some examples of direct-to-physician marketing it is not clear what the full extent of DTP means, i.e., does it cover visits by sales reps, company sponsored CME?

Page 6, Methods:

In this section the authors do not define: how they determined if study funded by pharmaceutical industry; how patient-oriented versus disease-oriented was determined; how the PA was compared to the original study. The authors also need to add a statement about ethical approval.

Page 6, third paragraph:

Did the authors a priori decide to stop collecting PAs when they reached 20 or was 20 the entire number that the physicians received?

3. There are problems with the organization of the material:

Page 8, first paragraph:
In the Methods section the authors do not mention that they intend to evaluate whether or not the underlying studies compare two active treatments but they are presenting results on this topic.

Page 9, first paragraph:

The authors comment that the overwhelming majority of data from the underlying studies were based on a desired visual impact. This analysis was not mentioned in either the Methods or Results. Similarly, later in this paragraph they mention that companies selected the outcome with the greatest relative risk reduction. Once again, there was no mention of this in either the Methods or Results.

Page 9, second paragraph:

The part of this paragraph starting "It should be noted, however, ..." is irrelevant to the purpose of this study. If the authors wish to include this material they need to do a better job of establishing how it is relevant.

Page 10, last paragraph:

There are additional limitations that need to be mentioned: there was a relatively small sample size; the analysis was limited to material that GPs receive, the material that specialists receive may be different; the results only apply to underlying studies that are used to support print material from the companies, studies used to support other types of DTP promotion may yield different results; the material was collected from a single institution and may not reflect material that is distributed in the community or in other geographic areas.

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

Page 5, first paragraph:

The figures on the amount spent on promotion to doctors is old. More recent information can be found at <http://www.imshealth.com/ims/portal/front/indexC/0,2773,6599_49695965_0,00.html>

Page 5, second paragraph:

When the authors discuss changes in the promotion of antihypertensives it's unclear what the authors mean - do they mean % of total dollars spent promoting antihypertensives, % of number of advertisements, etc.?

Page 6, second paragraph:

The authors need to define what they mean by patient-oriented and disease-oriented.

Page 6, last paragraph:

The authors seem to be saying that there was only a single underlying study for each PA. If that is true then it should be explicitly stated.

Page 10, last paragraph:

Do the authors mean "subjective" instead of "objective"?
Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.