Reviewer's report

Title: Nutritional supplements for diabetes sold on the internet: business or health promotion?

Version: 1 Date: 7 March 2013

Reviewer: Marco Cosentino

Reviewer's report:

This is a timely and interesting study addressing a specific aspect of the emerging general issue of the Internet as a worldwide available channel for easy access to drugs and other pharmacological substances.

The methods look appropriate, even if the search strategy which was used may have some inherent limitations: indeed, the authors complain about the low number of websites retrieved, however the addition of the term "purchase" to their search string ("diabetes nutritional supplements") would have possibly significantly increased the number of relevant websites among the first 30 occurrences which they stated to have considered (for instance, a quick search on Google, performed on March 7th 2013, using the string "diabetes nutritional supplements purchase" retrieved about 23 websites selling nutritional supplements for diabetics among the first 30 occurrences - see list below). Such limitation however is not so much critical, in my opinion, in view of the mainly descriptive aim of the study.

In such perspective, the results are of interest and add significantly to the still limited knowledge ad awareness about the topic of health information and its quality on the web.

Discussion is well balanced and in particular the limits of the study are adequately identified and commented.

* Major Compulsory Revisions

None.

* Minor Essential Revisions

(i) Additional information about websites should be included in Table 1. In particular, IP locations and addresses (which can be easily obtained by use of WhoIs Source [whois.domaintools.com] or of similar online tools) should be evaluated as they may represent a proxy for the risk of misleading and deceiving information and selling practices. Indeed, a previous work by our group aimed at the identification and analysis of popular websites selling androgenic anabolic steroids on the Internet (Gullotti Cordaro et al., Scand J Med Sci Sports 2011, 21: e247-59 - http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21210860) revealed that nearly half of the websites (14, 46,7%) were located in the United States, while the remaining websites were hosted in various states in Europe (9, 30%), in Canada (2, 6,7%), in the Republic of Panama (2, 6,7%), and in Hong Kong (1), Malaysia...
(1) and Turkey (1).

(ii) In the same study, we identified several clues suggesting that the Internet marketing of counterfeit products was a common occurrence, in particular among the nutritional supplements category. While the target population in this case is completely different, nonetheless I would recommend to evaluate some additional information regarding identified products, such as indication of the producer. In any case, the possibility that counterfeit products might be marketed over the Internet should be considered and discussed in the light of available literature.

(iii) Finally, I'd recommend to consider more in depth the potential for the occurrence of interactions between nutritional supplements and antidiabetic drugs, as the topic is of particular interest for the potential readers. In particular any documented interaction regarding the nutritional supplements considered in the study could be mentioned and maybe included e.g. in Table 1 or 3.

* Discretionary Revisions

None

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List of websites retrieved on Google using the string "diabetes nutritional supplements purchase" (March 7th 2013). In parentheses, information about the possibility to buy products.

(01) http://www.nestlenutritionstore.com (yes)
(02) http://www.americandiabeteswholesale.com (yes)
(03) http://diabetes.webmd.com (no)
(04) http://www.costco.com (yes)
(05) http://www.healthkart.com/diabetes (yes)
(06) http://www.livestrong.com (no)
(07) http://www.drugstore.com (yes)
(08) http://www.dlife.com (no)
(09) http://health.walmart.com (yes)
(10) http://www.amazon.com (yes)
(11) http://www.diabeticcareservices.com (yes)
(12) http://www.diabetes.org.nz (no)
(13) http://www.deathtodiabetes.com (yes?)
(14) http://www.amazon.com (no/yes)
(15) http://www.diabetes.co.uk (yes)
(16) http://www.supersupps.com (no)
(17) http://www.americandiabeteswholesale.com (yes)
(18) http://glucerna.com (yes)
Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests