

Update 40

THE DRUG INDUSTRY AND MEDICAL PRACTICE - A CASE STUDY OF MENOPAUSAL HORMONE THERAPY IN ESTONIA

The main aim of health care is to improve health, whereas that of the drug industry is to increase profits. Even though drugs can effectively be used to improve health, the profit-making aim has caused worry over the influence of the drug industry on medical practice. A particular concern is that one common method to increase profits is to increase the volume of drugs sold, which directly relates to how patients are treated. For methodological reasons it is difficult to show how big the influence of the drug industry is on physicians' prescribing, but the studies done so far, and the notable investment in drug promotion and advertising, suggest that the industry can effectively influence the choice of drugs. (1-10)

Much less clear is how much, and in which way, the industry influences the frequency of prescribing.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Estonia quickly adopted a market economy. In medicine this has included the uptake of western-style health care and drug promotion aimed at practising physicians. Using post-menopausal hormone therapy (HT) as an example, one group of researchers (11) recently attempted to study the consequences of this natural experiment on prescribing and on physicians' opinions of HT and drug promotion.

Data was obtained from a cross-sectional questionnaire sent to gynaecologists and family practitioners (FPs) in 2000 compared to results from an earlier survey, and from drug sales figures (based on defined daily doses), local medical journals and observations. The survey focused on physicians' opinions of HT, HT information and HT education, and was sent to a random sample of 500 physicians, of whom 68% responded.

The sales of HT drugs in the 1990s in Estonia rose rapidly during that decade. Physicians considered drug advertising to be a factor contributing to the increased HT use. Most gynaecologists but fewer FPs reported that they had had enough continuing education on menopause and HT. For 39% of the gynaecologists and 20% of the FPs, the costs to attend their last education activity were paid by a drug firm. Gynaecologists had had more communication on HT with the drug industry, and their attitudes towards HT were more positive than those of FPs. Fears about cancer in the 1980s were not found in 2000. This study suggests that the drug industry contributed to the change in physicians' views of HT.

The authors conclude, "...our HT example in Estonia suggests that the drug industry has not only advocated their own drugs, but has contributed to the introduction of a therapeutic tradition. Our study gives further evidence to the notion that the drug industry is active and successful in introducing and transforming medical practice and thinking. The influence of the drug industry on phenomena to be treated by drugs, meaning its tendency to encourage medicalisation, is not only a medical question but also an important social one."

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