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## Study Blasts TV Drug Ads

MONDAY, Jan. 29 (HealthDay News) -- In strong criticism of the pharmaceutical industry's marketing practices, new research claims that televised ads for prescription drugs are riddled with emotional appeals and lack helpful information on the disease itself.

"The ads really use emotion instead of information to promote drugs," said the study's lead author, Dominick Frosch, an assistant professor of medicine at the University of California, Los Angeles. "The question we have to ask ourselves is: (Should buying) prescription drugs be the same as buying soap?"

Pharmaceutical companies spent an estimated \$1.9 billion on TV advertising in 2005. In order to figure out the most common strategies used in some of the commercials, Frosch and his colleagues reviewed a sample of 38 ads for prescription drugs that appeared on network television in June and July 2004.

Using a statistical analysis that gave ads more "weight" if they were aired more frequently, the researchers report that 82 percent of the ads made "factual claims," but many fewer provided further information about illnesses such as causes (26 percent), risk factors (26 percent) or prevalence (25 percent).

Ninety-five percent of ads made "emotional appeals," and 78 percent implied that use of the medication would result in social approval. Fifty-eight percent of the time, products were depicted as medical breakthroughs.

The drugs advertised included Allegra (allergy), Ambien (insomnia), and Cialis (impotence), among others.

According to the new study, only two developed countries -- the United States and New Zealand -- allow drug companies as much unfettered access to the TV airwaves. In fact, the average American television viewer now spends 16 hours a year watching prescription drug ads, "far exceeding the average time spent with a primary care physician," Frosch's team said.

It wasn't always that way, according to Frosch. Before 1997, any drug ad -- on the air or in print -- had to include lengthy details about the drug. Those details are still found today in magazine ads for prescription drugs.

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But, in 1997, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration made it easier for the companies to advertise on TV. "They could just make a major statement that captures the primary risks and make adequate provisions to refer the consumers to other sources for more detail," Frosch said. "They refer to a concurrent print ad or a Web site or toll-free number."

Of course, even if patients are wooed by an ad, they can't get prescription drugs on their own. But, Frosch said, it's not enough to rely on doctors to make the right decisions about drugs that patients should take.

"The ads are effective in moving consumers to ask doctors for these prescriptions," he said. "And patients sometimes get the prescriptions, even though it's not the appropriate drug."

Frosch called on lawmakers to change the rules to force drug companies to provide more information about the medications they advertise. He also suggested that customers be skeptical of drug claims.

Last year, the American Medical Association called for a temporary ban on advertising for newly approved drugs and appealed for more federal oversight.

In response, the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, a trade group, said its voluntary guidelines are "sufficient to deal with the content of direct-to-consumer ads."

In a statement, the group said: "Informed patients are better patients, and DTC advertising provides doctors and patients with accurate, educational information about disease and treatment options."

But in a commentary accompanying the new study, a doctor and a legal specialist agreed that the drug industry's efforts are not enough.

Ads directed at consumers don't "effectively or consistently convey important information about product risks and benefits," wrote former FDA Commissioner Dr. David A. Kessler and Douglas A. Levy, of the University of California, San Francisco.

Dr. Sidney Wolfe, director of the Health Research Group at the watchdog group Public Citizen, said the FDA needs to do more to crack down on prescription drug ads, including levying big fines.

As it stands now, Wolfe said, drug companies "are able to run false and misleading ads with impunity and not be caught by the FDA because there's been (a decrease) in enforcement."

He called the new study's findings helpful. "If you go back 10 years ago, people were not doing studies at all -- or very little -- on advertising," he said.

But now, "people are actually starting to measure things and collect data," Wolfe added.