

Prescription drug ads leave out risks, alternatives

By Rita Rubin, USA TODAY

An analysis of television commercials for prescription drugs found that few mentioned risk factors or non-drug treatments for the conditions they target, scientists reported Monday.

The researchers recorded commercials that aired in prime time on ABC, CBS, NBC or Fox from June 30 to July 27, 2004. They ended up with 38 unique ads representing seven of the 10 top-selling prescription drugs of 2004, they write in the *Annals of Family Medicine*.

"All of the ads ... contained elements that we considered problematic," says lead author Dominick Frosch, assistant professor of medicine at the University of California-Los Angeles. "I think consumers should be more skeptical of the pharmaceutical ads than some surveys find they are."

Among flaws identified by Frosch and his collaborators:

- Only a quarter of the ads mentioned causes or risk factors for the condition treated by the drug.
- None of the commercials mentioned lifestyle changes as an alternative to medication (for example, diet and exercise to lower cholesterol), although about a fifth mentioned such changes as an adjunct to medication.
- Only a quarter of the commercials mentioned how common or uncommon the treated disease is.
- Most of the commercials were unrealistic in portraying medication's role in achieving health. The ads showed people ... who regained complete control of their lives after taking the advertised drug.

"Certainly, they leave a lot to be desired in terms of providing useful educational information to consumers," says Frosch, a health psychologist.

In an accompanying editorial, former Food and Drug Administration commissioner David Kessler and University of California-San Francisco colleague Douglas Levy write that direct-to-consumer ads "do not effectively or consistently convey important information about product risks and benefits."

"There is nothing wrong with pharmaceutical companies communicating directly with consumers, but they should adhere to the standards and ethics of medicine, not the standards and ethics of selling soap or some other consumer product that presents minimal risks," Kessler and Levy write.

Ken Johnson, senior vice president of the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, the prescription drug industry's main trade organization, says Frosch's study doesn't reflect changes brought about by his group's "Guiding Principles" for direct-to-consumer advertising. The voluntary guidelines came out about a year after the commercials in Frosch's study aired.

"The study does not reflect any of the positive changes in DTC advertisements over the past 12 months," Johnson said in a statement.

In their editorial, Kessler and Levy write that although such industry efforts "may be a step in the right direction, physicians, consumers and policymakers must take further action so that the facts about medicine are not lost in the advertising fog."