Pharmaceutical Promotion and Consumers: Unpacking the Assumptions

Marie-Clare Hogue, BSocSc, Dip Ed, MMedSc

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Discipline of Clinical Pharmacology and Toxicology
School of Medicine and Public Health
Faculty of Health
The University of Newcastle

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Signed, Marie-Clare Hogue
For my beautiful daughter Sadie Wells Ferguson.

I could not have undertaken this work without the unfailing devotion of my little girl.

Thank you my angel, I love you.
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This research explored a contradiction in Australian pharmaceutical promotion policy: direct to consumer advertising (DTCA) is banned yet pharmaceutical companies are allowed to run public “disease education” programs, some of which critics argue are examples of “disease mongering”. The latter is a pejorative term which refers to widening the diagnostic boundaries of illnesses, and promoting public awareness of such, in order to expand the markets for those who sell and deliver treatments.

This policy contradiction is reflected in two different views of consumers. One view sees the consumers as susceptible and gullible, lacking the skills to distinguish promotional hype from evidence of real clinical benefit desiring a “pill for every ill”. The alternative view is the “expert consumer” who can critically appraise new information presented by the pharmaceutical industry and, with the assistance of their medical advisor, make an informed decision to its relevance to them.

In this thesis, I examined these claims made about consumers; how consumers are presumed to behave and how consumers are constructed both as medicine users in disease mongering and in other discourses about promotion. I adopted a social science approach at the assumptions about consumers that inform the regulation and governance of drug promotion and explored the extent to which these assumptions are reflected in consumer’s reports of their medicine related behaviours.
This research has four strands. The first is a comprehensive review of literature especially with respect to sociological concepts of “pharmaceuticalisation”, “biomedicalisation” and “disease mongering”.

The second is structured in-depth interviews (by telephone or Skype) with 18 informants who had written critically about disease mongering, or pharmaceutical marketing more generally, analysed using grounded theory methodology.

The third looked at how primary media sources (print, radio, TV) in the Hunter Valley Region of NSW communicated information about health. It focusses on the ‘framing’ of three conditions: depression/bipolar disorder, breast cancer and obesity over a six month period in 2009. A commercial media monitor service was used and a total of 1,203 items were received. The three conditions selected comprised 153 items: depression/bipolar disorder n=37, breast cancer n=54 and obesity n=62.

The final strand is a cross-sectional study of a random sample of 800 Newcastle/Hunter community of NSW to investigate how consumers react to media reports of conditions and treatments and to explore its impact on their prescription related behaviours. The survey also investigates consumer attitudes to medicine use, the pharmaceutical industry, the industry doctor relationship and drug promotion to consumers. There was a 70 per cent response rate.

It is concluded that disease mongering represents only a part of pharmaceuticalisation albeit an important one. The pharmaceutical industry continues to produce new drugs
that are beneficial for diseases in which treatment options have been previously limited. The transformation of medicine from merely curing or alleviating disease to addressing risk factors such as high blood pressure, high blood sugar and high cholesterol has led to greater emphasis on the role of the individual to manage and control their own health and thus greater use of pharmaceuticals and their place in everyday life. In short, the demand for medicines is multi-factorial and addressing these is not as simple as banning DTCA. Policy needs to strike a balance between protecting the public from unscrupulous information and making sure consumers have access to the information they need to make informed decisions about their health. Independent information providers such as the National Prescribing Service (NPS) have an important role to play in this regard.

Publications arising from this research