Stop advertising

James Cave, Editor-in-Chief
The Downland Practice, Berkshire, UK
Correspondence to jcave@qbmj.com

In the UK, the promotion and advertising of prescription-only medicines (POMs) is tightly regulated by law with detailed guidance published in the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency’s (MHRA) Blue Guide.1 POMs can be promoted to healthcare professionals but must not be advertised to the general public. Any advertisement must present the medicine objectively ‘and without exaggerating its qualities’ and comply with the details listed in the summary of product characteristics. Reference material, factual informative statements or announcements are not considered to be adverts provided that they do not make a product claim and press releases should provide details of those for whom a drug may be suitable using language that is ‘factual and not sensationalised’.2 The guidance also makes it clear that anyone could be viewed as ‘exaggeration or undue emphasis’.2 Directly or by implication, by distortion, sensationalised’.1 The guidance also makes press releases should provide details of they do not make a product claim and advertisement must present the medicine in the summary of product characteristics.

We believe that such announcements do not constitute factual informative statements and relative rather than absolute reductions in fracture risk.5 Again, there was no information on possible harms. Larotrectinib (▼Vitrakvi) was also described by NICE as ‘game-changing’ and ‘cutting-edge’ even though the press release highlighted ‘uncertainty in the clinical evidence’ and again there was no detail of its possible harms.6 The MHRA’s press release on the oral antiviral molnupiravir (▼Lagevrio) included the words ‘game-changer’ and ‘ground-breaking treatment’, quoted the relative reduction in risk of hospitalisation or death and did not mention possible harms or make it clear that the drug had only been tested in people who had not been vaccinated against SARS-CoV-2.7

We believe that such announcements do not constitute factual informative statements and are at risk of promoting the use of a POM to the public, particularly as none of the webpages are denoted as appropriate only for health professionals. The absence of balanced and contextualised information on the potential harms and benefits of each drug is a serious omission. We suggest that NICE, MHRA and NHS England should follow the Blue Guide and present information about new medicines objectively and leave expressions such as ‘cutting-edge’, ‘game-changing’ and ‘ground-breaking’ to the advertising agencies.

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References