

Metaphors and symbols in drug promotional literature distributed by pharmaceutical companies

Pharmaceutical drug promotional literature is an important method of spreading the information regarding the drug to physicians. It is observed that physicians do get influenced by these drug promotional literatures.^[1] Various studies revealed that many of the drug promotional literature provide insufficient, incorrect and biased information.^[2] Quality of pictures and images printed in these drugs promotional literatures are always under scan. It is observed that pictures shown in these drug promotional literatures are racially and sexually biased.^[3] According to World health organization (WHO) criteria, persons portrayed in these drug advertisements should be according to racial and ethnic composition of the country, male and female should be portrayed in almost equal numbers and should be portrayed in similar ways and if symbols of metaphors are used in the advertisement they should be shown appropriately. Use of symbols of metaphors in drug advertisements (drug promotional literature) reduce the illness in only one direction and only one treatment modality i. e medicine and hence take the disease out of social context and also denying the role of other form of therapy. Study done by Ferner and Scott shows that metaphors and symbols in drug advertisements invokes strong feelings and physician may be unaware of hidden message in images or may be reluctant to acknowledge them leading to wrong prescription.^[4] In a study done by Scott it was observed that many drug pictures were associated with mythical and misleading association between disease and medicine.^[5] Few studies are done for reporting of metaphors and symbols in drug advertisements published in medical journals still no data is available for drug promotional materials distributed by pharmaceutical companies in India. Hence this study is done with the aim of appraising drug promotional materials distributed by pharmaceutical companies in OPDs of a tertiary level govt. hospital for metaphors and symbols with hidden meanings in them.

This study was done in Department of Pharmacology, Govt. Medical College, Surat (India). Drug promotional literature distributed by pharmaceutical companies to various Out patient departments of New Civil Hospital, Surat were collected by two first year residents of Department (see acknowledgement). Team of all four authors evaluated all these drug promotional literatures for metaphors and symbols published in them. Type of metaphors/symbols and their meanings were written in predesigned proforma. Meanings were decided on the basis of common consensus. Values were shown as frequency, percentage and 95% confidence interval around percentages.

Out of all 167 drug promotional literature showing pictures and images, symbols/metaphors were printed on 39 (23.3%, 95% CI 17.5% to 30.3%). Out of these 39, 16

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(41%) were related to psychotropic drugs. Out of these 39 metaphors, 25 (64.1%) were related to efficacy of drugs, 4 (10.2%) were related to safety of drug, 4 (10.2%) were related to symptoms of disease for which drug was indicated, 2 (5.2%) were related to wider availability of drug, 2 (5.2%) were related to price of drug, 1 (2.5%) each was related to duration of drug and comparison between drugs.

This study shows that metaphors and symbols are used frequently in drug promotional literatures. Physician should carefully assess the metaphors and symbols in drug promotional literatures before making any decision based on them.

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