EC moves towards “direct to consumer” advertising

Pharmaceutical companies will be able to provide information on prescription drugs directly to patients with AIDS, diabetes, or asthma under legislative proposals tabled by the European Commission.

Announcing the scheme, the enterprise commissioner, Erkki Liikanen, insisted that it was not intended to undermine the existing ban on public advertising of prescription medicines in Europe.

“This is not direct to consumer advertising. We are not introducing advertising for prescription drugs. I am against direct marketing as massive advertising could place a lot of pressure on the health costs that are covered by public authorities,” he said.

Companies will be able to offer details of their medicines—possibly on websites or in specialised publications—for the three long term, chronic diseases only if they are requested to do so by patients or patient groups.

Rory Watson Brussels

Scottish parliament urged to ban tobacco advertising

The Scottish parliament is being urged to go it alone and ban tobacco advertising after the failure of the Westminster government to bring forward legislation.

A coalition of health professionals and cancer charities has been formed in Scotland to campaign for a ban. They are supporting a private member’s bill, which the SNP (Scottish National Party) has promised to introduce into the Scottish parliament.

The BMA, the Royal College of Nursing, the Imperial Cancer Research Fund, Macmillan Cancer Relief, the Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation, the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, and ASH (Action on Smoking and Health) Scotland are all part of the coalition. They expressed regret at the lack of action at a UK level but said the opportunity still exists for legislation in Scotland.

Bryan Christie Edinburgh

EC to pursue its smuggling lawsuit against tobacco companies

The European Commission is planning to continue its multi-billion dollar lawsuit in the United States against two US tobacco multinationals—Philip Morris and R J Reynolds—after losing an initial judgment in a New York court.

With the formal backing of 10 of the European Union’s 15 member states, the commission alleged last November that the two companies conspired to smuggle cigarettes into Europe, increasing consumption and depriving the annual EU budget of billions of euros in lost revenue from taxes and excise duty.

The New York judge, Nicholas Garaufis, ruled the case out of order on a technicality involving the way the annual EU budget is financed.

Rory Watson Brussels

Doubts raised over cancer vaccine study

A prizewinning German study claiming to have found a safe and effective vaccine for kidney cancer has been heavily criticised by doctors who say that the research data may have been manipulated and that the treatment could even be dangerous.

Alexander Kugler, a senior registrar in the urology department of Göttingen University Hospital, and Gernot Stuhler, an oncologist from Tübingen University, treated 17 patients with metastasising kidney cancer with a vaccine made from a hybrid of cancer and immune cells. Their study, published in March last year, reported that after vaccination four patients experienced a full remission and in three others the tumours shrunk to half the original size (Nature Medicine 2000;6:332-6).

Doubts about the study began to surface earlier this year when a university ombudsman committee investigated whether a picture of the cell hybrid, published in another journal after being submitted by Dr Kugler for a thesis, was valid, and whether this had any impact on the credibility of the results of the study.

The committee did not find any evidence of scientific misconduct, but it said that the picture, which Dr Kugler had declared was his own, had come from the internet and that the authors had not been sufficiently diligent in their clinical practice.

Annette Tufts Heidelberg

Glossy magazine launched for women drug users

Mainline Lady, a lifestyle magazine offering information and advice on drugs, health, and women’s issues, has been launched in the Netherlands. Its target is an estimated 2000 to 4000 women users of drugs such as heroin and cocaine, and it will be offered free at methadone clinics, in prisons, and on the streets.

Modelling on other women’s fashion publications, it hopes to challenge the “junkie” image, arguing that many of its readers will be middle aged, married, mothers, wives, or girlfriends.

It does not campaign for abstinence but, by offering a positive image of women, hopes to empower its readers and increase their sense of responsibility. Senior editor Karin Kloostra wrote: “Caring for the body and looking after yourself is the theme which runs through this Mainline Lady.”

Featured on the cover of the first issue is 27 year old model Shauna Heron, highlighting an article on fashion inside. Ms Heron recently successfully underwent a detoxification programme under anaesthetic.

Tony Sheldon Utrecht

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Bryan Christie Edinburgh

Moderate use of painkillers presents no harm to kidneys

A new study counters the belief that moderate, chronic use of common analgesics results in kidney damage (JAMA 2001; 286:315-21).

The study investigated moderate, chronic intake of analgesics—equivalent to three or four tablets a week. It was conducted by researchers from Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston and was funded by the National Institutes of Health and by MacNeil Consumer Products, the maker of Tylenol, a popular brand of paracetamol.

Kathryn Rexrode and colleagues compared analgesic intake and renal function in a cohort of 11032 initially healthy men, ranging in age from 40 to 84, who were enrolled in the physicians’ health study. This study lasted 14 years, from September 1982 to December 1995.

Participants in the study were...
asked to report their use of paracetamol, aspirin, and other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, such as ibuprofen and naproxen.

Multivariable analyses were used to adjust for age; body mass index; history of hypertension, raised cholesterol concentrations, diabetes, or cardiovascular disease; physical activity; and use of other analgesics.

Kidney function was assessed from tests of creatinine clearance and blood creatinine concentration taken at the conclusion of the study. Raised creatinine concentrations were defined as ≥15 mg/dl, and reduced creatinine clearance was defined as ≥55 ml/min.

Overall, 460 men (4.2%) had raised creatinine concentrations and 1258 (0.4%) had reduced creatinine clearance.

The investigators found that men who reported taking 2500 or more analgesic pills over the study period (equivalent to three or more analgesic pills each night) had an average of three or four analgesics.

According to quality. The reviewers were not aware of the doses used for each image.

Before the study, the standard radiographic technique was to use a current of 280 mAs, producing a dose of 600 mrem. Yet the radiologists could not tell the difference between images taken at that current and those taken at 160 mAs—a dose of 340 mrem. Although a further reduction of the current to 120 mAs—producing a dose of 260 mrem—did produce a noticeable reduction of image quality, the radiologists decided that it was insufficient to justify exposing the patient to the additional radiation. David Spurgeon Quebec

Early bypass surgery increases risk of stroke

Patients who have a coronary artery bypass graft soon after experiencing unstable angina or non-Q wave myocardial infarcts face a higher risk of stroke than those who forgo the surgery or delay it, according to a study (Circulation 2001;104: 269-74).

The study suggested that physicians should rethink the advisability of early aggressive surgical revascularisation after heart attacks. Dr Lisa Cronin and colleagues from McMaster University in Ontario, Canada, studied the risk of stroke after ischaemic events in 18151 patients enrolled in the Organization to Assess Strategies for Ischemic Syndromes, a registry of patients who were admitted to hospital with unstable angina and non-Q wave myocardial infarcts.

Patients who had bypass surgery were nearly four times more likely to have a subsequent stroke than those who did not. Additionally, the risk of stroke rose in those who had bypass surgery within two weeks of their heart attack. Deborah Josefson San Francisco

Kyoto protocol rescued in Bonn

Kathryn Sheridan Bonn

Success came at the 11th hour at United Nations climate talks in Bonn as the future of the Kyoto protocol was saved by a last minute compromise.

Ministers from 174 countries went into an all night session and an unplanned fifth day of talks as negotiators and the conference chairman—the Dutch environment minister, Jan Pronk—tried to break the deadlock on the main issue of disagreement, legal penalties. This centred on whether to have legally binding penalties for countries failing to meet their emissions targets, a proposal strongly opposed by Japan, Canada, and Russia.

Although the text, agreed after marathon negotiations, was watered down from Mr Pronk’s compromise proposal, the adoption of the draft decision on 23 July is being seen as a major political victory.

However, although some parties are critical that the deal is too weak, all are relieved that something has been agreed. Even if this deal only achieves a return to 1990 emissions levels, it would still be an improvement.

The European environment commissioner, Margot Wallström, called the deal “imperfect” but said: “We have started something so important today. It’s important to see the bigger picture.”

Mr Pronk said that reconvening the talks after they broke down in The Hague in November 2000 had been “risk,” particularly since the US rejection of the treaty in March. Agreement was reached on the other sticking points—notably, “sinks” (the amount of land and forests that can be used as credits against an emissions reduction target because they absorb carbon). The issue of sinks was held responsible for the collapse of the talks in The Hague.

The European Union also compromised on allowing sinks to be included in the clean development mechanism—a “flexible” mechanism giving industrialised countries credit for environmental and clean energy projects in developing countries. But in return the European Union insisted that nuclear energy could not be used to generate credits under the clean development mechanism. They also imposed a cap to limit the use of overseas sinks.

The European Union, along with Canada, Iceland, New Zealand, Norway, and Switzerland, has promised £293m ($410m) a year by 2005 for the three funds to help developing countries, as agreed in the compromise deal. These are an adaptation fund, a climate change fund, and a fund for the least developed countries.

Deborah Josefson San Francisco

 Radiation dose in scans could be halved

The radiation dose in some chest examinations using computed axial tomography can be more than halved without jeopardising the radiologist’s ability to make a diagnosis, a new study has said (American Journal of Roentgenology 2001;177:279-84).

To find the minimum radiation dose needed to maintain good image quality in computed axial tomography, the radiologists took six sets of images of 10 patients using a current of 40-280 milliamperes per second (mAs), which produced doses of 90-600 millirem (mrem). Five radiologists reviewed all of the images for each patient, ranking them according to quality. The reviewers were not aware of the doses used for each image.

Overall, 460 men (4.2%) had raised creatinine concentrations and 1258 (0.4%) had reduced creatinine clearance.

The study indicates that taking an average of three or four pills of analgesics a week is safe for the kidneys. However, analgesic nephropathy is more common in women than in men. The authors acknowledge that the study is only on men but “saw no biological reason why they wouldn’t apply to women.”

Deborah Josefson San Francisco

The water installation “Climate accident”, by German activist-artist Kurt Jotter greeted delegates at the Bonn talks.
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