LETTER

Direct to consumer advertising on websites of Peruvian naturopathic pharmacies

Direct-to-consumer advertising (DTCA) of pharmaceuticals is undertaken by pharmaceutical companies in order to encourage the consumption of medications. The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) classifies DTCA into three types: (1) reminder advertisements contain the name of a drug only and are designed to reinforce brand recognition; (2) help-seeking advertisements contain information about a disease or condition without mentioning a particular treatment; (3) product-claim advertisements contain specifically effective and safe information about drug products and display ads that contain the names of

them, indications, and information about their safety and effectiveness.¹

Despite the importance of DTCA, there are no studies in naturopathic pharmacies, which offer alternative medications that may have mild to severe adverse reactions, including renal failure or liver toxicity, and may even cause death.²

In order to evaluate DTCA in Peruvian naturopathic pharmacies, we used the Google search engine in a browser with previously deleted cookies, with the Spanish terms for 'naturopathic pharmacy', 'health food store', 'naturopathic products', 'naturopathic medicine', 'alternative medicine', 'traditional medicine', and 'agro-food', combined with the term 'Peru'. The first 100 results for each combination were evaluated, and all the webpages offering naturopathic medicines in Peru that had at least an update in the last 5 years were selected. We collected 37 websites (table 1).

We found that 84.8% of the websites contain the name of only one drug, which is not an appropriate form of propaganda, and may lead to an indiscriminate consumption of these products. Only 9.1% of the webpages provided information about safety and efficacy of medications. Nevertheless, the 'Regulations for the Registration and Control of Pharmaceutical Health Surveillance Products' of Peru states that the promotion of herbal medicines must contain technical information in support of their efficacy and safety. Therefore, this regulation has been transgressed by most of the pharmacies for not providing the information necessary for consumers to make an informed decision.³

All websites analysed have a delivery service, and there is no mention that purchasing of any of the drugs requires a medical prescription. However, the FDA recommends that complementary therapies and alternative medicines should have a written prescription, whether it is labelled to be used in prevention, diagnosis, cure, mitigation or treatment of a disease.⁴ The current Peruvian legislation allows for herbal products to be sold without a prescription only if they are effective, safe and used in the prevention, alleviation or treatment of minor illnesses. However, some of the evaluated pharmacies provide drugs for diseases such as

diabetes, hypertension, arthritis or dyslipidaemia.

In conclusion, several Peruvian naturopathic pharmacies promote their drugs online without meeting national or international regulations. These dangerous practices may be occurring in other countries, so it could be necessary to establish an active DTCA surveillance programme directed at the mass media.⁵

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Table 1 Characteristics of the websites of Peruvian naturopathic pharmacies (N=37)

Feature	N (%)
Mentions that at least one of the medicines offered requires a prescription	0 (0.0)
Offers home delivery service	37 (100.0)
Contacts for delivery	
Phone number	37 (100.0)
Web page or email	36 (97.3)
Store	33 (89.2)
Facebook	23 (62.2)
Twitter	10 (27.0)
Scope of delivery	
Lima (capital of Peru) only	17 (46.0)
Lima and other cities	16 (43.2)
Cities other than Lima	4 (10.8)
Without DTCA	4 (10.8)
With DTCA	33 (89.2)
DTCA 1*	28 (84.8)
DTCA 2†	2 (6.1)
DTCA 3‡	3 (9.1)

*DTCA 1: Reminder advertisements contain the name of one drug only and are designed to reinforce brand recognition.

†DTCA 2: Help-seeking advertisements contain information about a disease or condition without mentioning a particular treatment.

‡DTCA 3: Product-claim advertisements contain specific efficacy and safety information about specific drug products and display ads that contain the names of them, indications, and information about their safety and effectiveness.³

DTCA, direct-to-consumer advertising.