

Who do you work for?



Imagine for a moment that you work for the drug industry. Your constant preoccupation would be your sales curve, to expand your market share, to obtain the necessary marketing authorisations as quickly and cheaply as possible, and ultimately to increase your profits.

You would want to know and use all the tricks of the trade. Especially the trick of convincing everyone that without your products — and your “new” products in particular — there would be no therapeutic solution worthy of the name. You would start convincing health professionals of this by targeting recognised “specialists” in the relevant field, using the links you have forged with them during the development of your products, by involving them in discussions, steering committees, carefully selected publications in English, and major conferences. Once you had established the authority of these leaders and spread your message far and wide in the media and in official or not-so-official guidelines, significant numbers of less renowned specialists would be persuaded; and then many non-specialists would be drawn in or would not dare challenge the consensus or would struggle to be heard.

You would also want to convince patients of your products’ merits. Through articles and TV and radio programmes that play up the unmet therapeutic need ahead of the launch of your products. Through articles and TV and radio programmes hailing the opportune arrival of your products. Through endorsements from patient groups, thankful for your generous financial support.

You would want to convince policy makers too and point out that any policies that could hold back your company’s expansion or competitiveness would not be in their interests either, as they would jeopardise precious jobs and reduce tax receipts.

Let’s return to reality now: you are a healthcare professional, paid by your patients/clients (or their representatives) to treat them, advise them, and to help them make informed decisions and decide what is useful and what is unnecessary. To shield them from the next Mediator°. To offer them drug therapy only when the potential benefits outweigh the dangers.

You have a permanent need for dependable, accurate analyses and suggestions. You must distinguish the exaggerations (and sometimes the lies) of industry advertising, in all its forms, from the real therapeutic advances. Because nine times out of ten, the drug industry’s new products do not enable healthcare professionals to provide better care for patients; but one in ten products will offer some small benefit to patients that should not be overlooked.

It’s not easy to sort the wheat from the chaff and avoid being duped. Because pharmaceutical companies constantly pressurise all the stakeholders in the healthcare system — patients, healthcare professionals, public authorities — and powerfully maintain confusion between their respective roles.

The key question that each of us must answer is: **who do we work for and whose interests do we defend at the end of the day?**

We should ask ourselves this question often. And organise ourselves according to our answer.

This question is as pertinent in 2012 as it was 10, 20 or 30 years ago. For example, to ensure that it provides critical, reliable, dependable information, *Prescrire* has chosen its allegiances so has opted to be funded solely by its subscribers and to shun advertising and other financial support. *Prescrire* is financially dependent on its 35 000 subscribers; but has no dependency on the pharmaceutical industry, any public authorities or health insurance organisations. Far from being utopian, it is an effective, pragmatic choice, provided one perseveres and works patiently. *Prescrire* had about 25 000 subscribers in

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the year 2000, 30 000 in 2010, and 35 000 in 2012: health professionals are increasingly choosing independence, whether they be doctors, pharmacists, nurses, etc. And patients increasingly do likewise.

Thank you to Philippe de Chazournes and the participants in this international conference on independence in medicine for giving momentum to the movement and all those who choose independence.

Bruno Toussaint

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