

A survey of the effects of a drug promotion campaign

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SUMMARY. A postal survey which tried to test the impact of a drug-promotion campaign is described. One hundred and twenty randomly-selected general practitioners were circulated and a 74.8 per cent response was obtained. Of the responders, 92 per cent were aware of the existence of the preparation, and of these responders 69 per cent were unaware either of the pharmacologically approved name of the drug, or the fact that its pharmacologically active constituent was already available under another brand name.

Introduction

Recently a new product for the treatment of vestibular disorders was launched by a drug company. The pharmacologically active component of this product is identical to that of a well-established product marketed by another company. The difference between them is that the new product is in a sustained release form. It is not common for new drug products to be promoted which are essentially the same as well-established preparations, so this promotional campaign produced an opportunity to study the effects of drug company advertising in novel circumstances.

Method

A random sample of 120 general practitioners were sent a questionnaire. The sample was obtained by taking every fourth name from a list of doctors in contract with an urban executive council. A reply paid envelope was provided, and no attempt was made to identify the doctors individually.

Results

Response rate

One hundred and twenty questionnaires were posted, and five of these were returned undelivered by the Post Office; 115 questionnaires can therefore be considered to have reached the doctors. Eighty-six were returned, giving a response rate of 74.8 per cent.

Results of questionnaire

The results are shown in the table on the next page.

Closer analysis of questions 6 and 7 revealed the following:

(1) Twelve doctors named both the correct constituent and another branded preparation containing this constituent.

(2) Nine doctors could not name the correct constituent, but could name another branded preparation containing the constituent.

(3) Five doctors named the correct constituent, but either did not know of another branded preparation containing this constituent, or named more than one branded preparation.

Thus a total of 26 doctors (31.4 per cent) were aware, either of the correct name of the pharmacologically active constituent of the new product, or the other branded preparation which was already available.

Discussion

The response to this survey shows that a simple postal questionnaire can elicit an acceptable response rate (74.8 per cent). Busy doctors cannot be expected to cope with extensive enquiries when they read their mail, and these questions could be completed in a minute or two. There is, however, the disadvantage that there is no check that instructions included in the questionnaire are complied with. Thus the figure of 31.4 per cent for those who were aware either of the

REPLIES TO QUESTIONNAIRE

	Question	Answer affirmative
1	Have you heard of ———?	(n=86) 79 (91.9%)
2	Do you remember noticing advertisements in medical periodicals promoting ———?	(n=79) 62 (78.5%)
3	Do you recall a drug company representative mentioning ——— to you?	50 (63.4%)
4	Do you recall ——— being mentioned to you, or being on display, at a luncheon/dinner provided by a drug company which you have attended?	15 (19.0%)
5 (a) (b)	Do you remember any "sales gimmick" used in connection with the promotion of ———? If YES could you briefly describe this "sales gimmick."	15 (19.0%) 13
6 (a) (b)	Do you know, without reference to <i>MIMS</i> , or elsewhere, the approved pharmacological name of the constituent(s) of ———? If YES what is it/are they?	17 (21.3%) (see text)
7	Do you know of any other proprietary preparation containing the same pharmacological substance(s)? If YES, name the preparation.	24 (30.4%) (see text)

product's pharmacological name, or of another branded product containing the same drug, may be an overestimate.

There is little published evidence with which to compare the figures in this survey. Biron (1973) in a survey of Canadian doctors, found that there was a remarkable degree of ignorance concerning the constituents of proprietary products that contain drug combinations. An average of 23 per cent correct answers was obtained when the doctors were questioned about a range of products in common use.

The fact that a doctor is unaware of the pharmacologically approved name of a product does not mean that he knows nothing about its pharmacology. It is nevertheless alarming that a drug company can successfully promote the name of a new product without doctors realising that this product is already available in a very similar form. In this survey 68.6 per cent of the doctors questioned appeared to be unaware that two branded products which contained the same pharmacologically active ingredient were being marketed simultaneously.

The Sainsbury Committee recommended in its report (1967) that a drug should only be marketed under a name that was approved by the Medicines Commission, but that pharmaceutical firms should be allowed to attach their trade marks to their particular product. If these recommendations had been implemented, the confusing state of affairs revealed by this survey would not have occurred.

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