Introduction

Direct to consumer advertising (DTCA) is an effort employed by pharmaceutical companies in the United States, used to promote prescription and over the counter (OTC) medications to the lay public. These advertisements target patients and often ask them to “talk to their doctor” about a specific medication in the hopes that a provider may prescribe or recommend that medication for use by the patient. DTCA is a unique aspect of the United States healthcare system. New Zealand, along with New Zealand are the only two countries in the world to allow DTCA. In the US, DTCA for prescription drugs is regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), while DTCA for over the counter (OTC) drugs is regulated by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). Our study revealed that OTC drugs are advertised much more frequently than prescription drugs, 82.9% and 14.3% respectively. These data are in concurrence with typical drug recommendations of otolaryngologists, with most of their medication recommendations being for OTC medications.

The FDA has quite stringent regulations on drug advertising and requires that each advertisement include the following: at least one approved use for the drug, the generic name of the drug, and all or most important risks of the drug.

Several studies have shown relationships between advertising dollars spent and increases in sales and prescriptions. Specifically, one study showed that increased advertising for PPI medication increased the number of times providers switched specific medications within that drug class, for patients. Though this may seem harmless for theses medications, it shows that DTCA may even sway the ways that doctors prescribe or recommend medications 1-11.

One study by Kamenica et al showed a relationship between advertising and physiologic response to medication12. This study 2 groups of patients without clinical allergy symptoms were given either Claritin or Allegra. They were then asked to watch advertising for Claritin during the trial. The results showed that nearly all of the Claritin patients felt that the drug worked better for them. This shows that advertisements can cause a placebo-like effect in patients and cause them to believe that their current medication regimen, or lack thereof, may be ineffective or worse than the drug that they are seeing in the media or in advertisements, when the drugs have been shown to be equivocal in randomized trials.

Materials and Methods

74 issues of 31 different magazine publications were reviewed from March to November 2016. Each advertisement for medications, whether prescription or OTC, was tallied. The subset of DTCA that was relevant to otolaryngology was also tallied. Similarly, television advertisements were screened for DTCA during the evening news on three different channels for one week in May 2016. Total number of DTCA was totaled along with DTCA relevant to the field of otolaryngology.

Results

In 74 issues of 31 different magazine publications there were 266 total direct to consumer advertisements, 35 (13.2%) of these were medications frequently prescribed by Otolaryngologists. In screening the evening news for one week on three different channels there were 117 direct to consumer advertisements, 35 (29.9%) of these were for medications frequently prescribed by otolaryngologists. These advertisements are not screened for scientific backing before they are published or placed on the air.

Discussion

Prilosec had $203.5 million in sales in 201813. Flonase and Nasacort had $229.9 million and $72.3 million in sales, respectively, in 201914. Actual advertising expenditures made by the companies that sell these medications was not available during the time of the study. Due to this, we can not directly infer or conclude that advertising spending increased sales revenue of these medications. However, it is interesting to note that the relative prevalence of DTCA for Flonase and Prilosec, seem to mirror their sales comparisons as noted above.

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Conclusion

In this study, we found DTCA relevant to otolaryngology to be pervasive in magazine and television lay media, representing 13.2% and 29.9% of total DTCA viewed in this study. The most frequently advertised medications in these forums were intransnal steroids, and proton-pump inhibitors. We also provided a brief overview of expenditures made to advertise for these medications. As otolaryngologists, we should be aware that our patients are viewing otolaryngology related DTCA in everyday media, and by extension, may be influenced in the way they use these medications.

References


