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Information and Communication on Risks Related to Medications and Proper Use of Medications for Healthcare Professionals and the General Public: Precautionary Principle, Risk Management, Communication During and in the Absence of Crisis Situations

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Abstract – Recent drug crises have highlighted the complexity, benefits and risks of medication communication. The difficulty of this communication is due to the diversity of the sources of information and the target audience, the credibility of spokespersons, the difficulty to communicate on scientific uncertainties and the precautionary principle, which is influenced by variable perceptions and tolerances of the risk. Globally, there is a lack of training in risk management with a tendency of modern society to refuse even the slightest risk. Communication on medications is subject to regulatory or legal requirements, often uses tools and messages that are not adapted to the target audience and is often based on a poor knowledge of communication techniques. In order to improve this situation, the available information must be coordinated by reinforcing the unique medication information website and by coordinating communication between authorities by means of a single spokesperson. A particular effort must be made in the field of training in the proper use and risk of medications for both the general population and patients but also for healthcare professionals, by setting up a unified academic on-line teaching platform for continuing medical education on medications and their proper use.

Abbreviations: see end of article.

1. Introduction

Recent affairs, such as those concerning third and fourth generation oral contraceptive pills, or furosemide, have revealed defects in the information, communication, education or training in the proper use and the risks possibly induced by medications. Multiple information sources, multiple and sometimes contradictory messages communicated by various spokespersons strike a particularly strong echo with the public, patients or healthcare professionals. The expected objective of good communication on the benefits and risks of medications is to modify behaviour in order to improve proper use and minimise risks (figure 1). The object of round table 6 of the Giens workshop was to review the current situation and the defects in terms of information and communication in the field of risk and proper use of medications in relation to healthcare professionals and the general public and to define guidelines to more effectively prevent and manage drug crises.

2. Current situation

Multiple and heterogeneous sources of information are used by numerous spokespersons in the field of medications. The multiplicity and heterogeneity for these information sources requires critical analysis of the information and the legitimacy of their communication by one or several spokespersons whose common interest is to promote proper use of medications. Alongside the official information, which, up until recently in France, was dispersed over several websites, many sources of variable quality all using existing communication media are also available. The public medication database was launched at the beginning of October.[1] It pools information on all pharmaceutical products available on the French market, derived from the French National Agency for Medicines and Health Products Safety *(Agence nationale de sécurité du médicament et des produits de santé*, ANSM), the European Medicines Agency (EMA) for medications authorised by European centralised procedures, the French National Authority for Health (*Haute autorité de santé*, HAS) and the National Union of Health Insurance Funds (*Union nationale des caisses d'Assurance maladie*, UNCAM) under the aegis of the French Department of Health (*Direction générale de la santé*, DGS). Creation of this database corresponds to the desire to more adequately inform patients and healthcare professionals about medications, by improving the quality, transparency, and accessibility of this information. The on-line database very effectively meets these objectives concerning information. It allows easy access to the summary of product characteristics and its annexes (including the package leaflet), the transparency commission opinion and information on particular risks and surveillance.

This tool provides healthcare professionals with free, rapid, and comprehensive access to official data on medications with a marketing authorisation in France, the first step before asking a regional pharmacovigilance centre for a more detailed or personalised data search. The database provides information for all medications, including those not listed in the Vidal® drug directory, but not for medications no longer marketed for more than 2 years, which may constitute a limitation in terms of transparency.

A drawback of this database is that it provides information which must has yet to be adapted to patients. General, educational information on medications, adapted to the public, is available to users to a website,[2] providing an entry point to the public medication database. Navigation from the website to the database and *vice versa* is very easy, thereby allowing the user to consult, at any time while searching the database, more general information allowing the available information to be placed in perspective. Apart from the package leaflet with its regulatory requirements which make it poorly accessible, none of the texts published on-line in the database have been written for the general public. At the present time, the very praiseworthy excess of transparency means that sometimes very large quantities of very technical, alarming, and possibly poorly informative data is available. The reader may be overwhelmed by the volume of data or may even be unable to visualize the information that he or she is looking for. The amount of available information can finally limit the true transparency, as too much information kills information.