

Trends in Direct-to-Consumer Advertising During Prime-Time Television News Programs

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Abstract

Introduction: The purpose of this study is to characterize contemporary trends in direct-to-consumer advertising of urological pharmaceutical products on American prime-time television programs. Television is the highest expenditure segment of the consumer drug marketing industry. The extent of advertising in urology and its potential impact on patients are not well understood.

Methods: We retrospectively analyzed an indexed database of prime-time news broadcasts on 5 national networks in the United States. The database was queried with the names of 77 urological pharmaceutical products to identify all commercials that aired during a 36-month period between 2010 and 2013. Noncommercial segments were excluded. Descriptive and linear regression analysis was performed.

Results: We analyzed 4,574 broadcasts, representing 3,067.5 hours of prime-time television. A total of 2,068 commercials for 8 products and 4 urological indications were aired, including sildenafil and tadalafil for erectile dysfunction; 2 testosterone products for hypogonadism; fesoterodine, oxybutynin and solifenacin for overactive bladder; and sipuleucel-T for metastatic castration resistant prostate cancer. Commercials for male oriented indications accounted for 90% of the sample. At least 1 urological advertisement was contained in 1,744 broadcasts (38%). The introduction of television marketing for newly approved testosterone supplementation products in 2012 corresponded to strongly linear growth in overall urological advertising, reaching peak levels in 2013.

Conclusions: Urological pharmaceutical products have been consistently advertised on television. Commercials have extensively targeted male oriented indications. Viewers of national news programs were exposed to urological advertising during about 40% of broadcasts with steadily increasing exposure since 2012. Providers should be aware of these trends to contextualize demand and monitor prescribing patterns.

Key Words: urological agents, testosterone, direct-to-consumer advertising, television, drug industry

Abbreviations and Acronyms

ABC = American Broadcasting Company

CBS = Columbia Broadcasting System

CNN = Cable News Network

FDA = United States Food and Drug Administration

FNC = Fox News Channel

NBC = National Broadcasting Company

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written informed consent with guarantees of confidentiality; IRB approved protocol number; animal approved project number.

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Direct-to-consumer advertising is the marketing of pharmaceutical products or medical services directly to consumers through lay media, including print, radio, television and internet platforms.¹ The United States is 1 of only 2 developed countries where this kind of advertising is permitted. Since federal regulations on broadcast advertising were relaxed in 1997, patient oriented commercials for pharmaceutical products have grown into a multi-billion dollar industry, rising more than 300% in the decade following the regulatory changes² and accounting for \$3.5 billion in spending in 2012.³ The sharp increases in advertising in the last decade have largely been due to television commercials, for which expenditures have exceeded those of all other media combined.³

Broadcast advertising has been shown to work synergistically with traditional print advertisements⁴ to increase overall consumer awareness of, demand for and spending on targeted prescription products.^{1,5-8} In theory, these advertisements can educate consumers about health conditions and encourage select patients to seek professional guidance about diagnosis and treatment.⁹⁻¹¹ However, critics of direct-to-consumer marketing have argued that any informational benefit is outweighed by confusing or misleading claims, imbalance in risk-to-benefit comparisons, unnecessary prescription of expensive drugs and adverse effects on the relationship between patients and physicians.^{9,12-14}

Prior work has examined direct-to-consumer promotion of urological medications and procedures in print media¹⁵ and on the internet.¹⁶ However, to our knowledge no studies to date have systematically characterized advertising for pharmaceutical products on television, which remains the most influential medium for selling prescription drugs. The extent of broadcast advertising for urological indications, particularly in the context of the recently FDA approved formulations of testosterone supplementation, is not well understood.

The aim of this study was to investigate the extent of and potential patient exposure to contemporary direct-to-consumer advertising of urological pharmaceutical products on television in the United States.

Materials and Methods

Evening news programs are the most common broadcasting period for direct-to-consumer drug advertisements.¹⁷ We extracted data from the Vanderbilt Television News Archive (<https://dev-tvnews.library.vanderbilt.edu/>), an indexed database of prime-time news broadcasts on 5 American national television networks, including ABC, CBS, CNN, FNC and NBC. The archive includes information about each broadcast, including the date, time and content synopses of

news program segments. For commercial segments the database captures advertised products and the sequence in which advertisements appear.

The archive was queried with 77 generic and trade names of pharmaceutical products related to urology for all broadcasts between December 2010 and November 2013. The list of products was developed and verified using FDA Approved Drug Products with Therapeutic Equivalence Evaluations (Orange Book) (supplementary Appendix, <http://jurology.com/>). Nonadvertising segments that aired during the news broadcast (eg a news report about FDA approval of a product) were excluded from study. Data on all advertising segments were compiled for descriptive analysis. Linear regression was used to study the growth in monthly aired advertisements after the introduction of testosterone products. Statistics were performed using Excel® 2013 and Stata®, version 11.

Results

The sample included advertisements that aired during scheduled 30-minute weeknight and weekend broadcasts of ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News and NBC Nightly News as well as 30 to 60-minute evening news broadcasts on CNN and FNC. During the 36-month study period prime-time news programs aired 4,574 unique broadcasts, representing 3,067.5 hours of national network television. Of these broadcasts 1,744 contained at least 1 advertisement for a urological product, equaling 38.1% broadcast penetration.

The table summarizes the 8 products that were advertised. These products were marketed for 4 urological indications, including sildenafil and tadalafil for erectile dysfunction; 2 testosterone products for hypogonadism; fesoterodine, oxybutynin and solifenacin for overactive bladder; and sipuleucel-T for metastatic castration resistant prostate cancer. No advertisements for products indicated for benign prostatic hyperplasia (5 products), interstitial cystitis (1) or Peyronie's disease (1) were found. Erectile dysfunction was the most commonly advertised indication, accounting for 62% of total advertisements (fig. 1). Products for hypogonadism were also relatively common with 28% of advertisements while commercials for overactive bladder (10%) and prostate cancer (less than 1%) were less frequently shown.

Advertisements for male oriented indications accounted for more than 90% of the sample, disproportionately higher relative to the number of such products included or found in the queries. Of the 77 products queried 58 (75%) were for male oriented indications. Five of the 8 products (63%) that were advertised in the study period were indicated for men only.

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