

Better ads for healthier people



August was the happiest month, happy because the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), under pressure from the Congress to reform itself or be reformed, issued new regulations allowing companies to advertise prescription drugs on television. Under the new guidelines the companies can also name the previously unmentionable disease, provided that they offer an accompanying brochure, a toll free telephone number, or an Internet address. The FDA hailed the move as a great advance in bringing health to the people. It would "promote greater consumer awareness about prescription drugs" and "end the uncertainty that has plagued both the consumers and industry."

Down then with the plague. And yet there might still be something a little distasteful in having the six o'clock news interspersed with ads for hemorrhoids, bunions, jock itch, genital herpes, and vaginitis—prescription drugs or no prescription drugs. But this is not a squeamish age; and no longer are the pains and pleasures of the body indelicate subjects of conversation. Indeed the spokesmen for the drug companies were delighted, as was the association of advertising agencies, as were representatives of community groups. How excellent that doctors who depend exclusively on the advertising pages in peer reviewed medical journals will now be able to discontinue their subscriptions.

Only some gruff consumer advocates were displeased—but what else is news? One of them even thought that the new guidelines would "massively increase the already rising amount of misleading information." Another group recently asserted that 40-50% of advertisements misled doctors and overstated the benefits of drugs, this at a time when the industry spent more than \$1 billion on advertising drugs each year.

So it comes down to this—not aesthetics, not ethics, but economics. More than ever doctors will be under pressure to prescribe the latest, the most fashionable, the most advertised drug. And why not prescribe a pill that costs two dollars instead of a cent when it is free and even on television. But drug budgets are going up and up, budget officers are tearing out their hair, and managed care is trying to restrict prescribing to formulary items, causing the doctors to scream about interference with the practice of medicine.

And scream indeed they might. For the economy is booming, the drug companies' profits are going up. So are the prices of their shares, so is the value of the workers' retirement funds. And there are more jobs, for drug salesmen and researchers and workers and secretaries in drug factories, for brokers and bankers and portfolio managers, for printers and publishers and advertisers, so that eventually the money trickles down, then moves up again, and so it goes round and round, in these best of possible times in this best of possible worlds.