

## CONTINUING EDUCATION

# Direct-to-Consumer Advertising of Prescription Medications: Implications for Patients With Cancer

Pamela Hallquist Viale, RN, MS, CS, ANP, OCN®

**Purpose/Objectives:** To review the phenomenon of direct-to-consumer (DTC) advertising of prescription medications in the media, with an overview of pertinent studies in the literature regarding patients' and healthcare professionals' perspectives on DTC advertising.

**Data Sources:** Journal articles, media, and clinical experience.

**Data Synthesis:** DTC advertising of prescription medications is extremely prevalent in U.S. society. Advertising of medications is an expensive business; yearly spending is expected to reach \$7.5 billion by 2005. Although opinions vary regarding DTC advertising, healthcare professionals, including oncology nurses, must be prepared to discuss DTC-advertised medications and treatments with their patients.

**Conclusions:** Communication is the key to helping patients decipher the deluge of DTC advertisements in the media and determine the accuracy of this ever-increasing source of medical information.

**Implications for Nursing:** Oncology nurses need to be aware of the increases in DTC advertising of prescription medications and the importance of guiding patients through appropriate medication choices by education.

When the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act was passed in 1938, the pharmaceutical industry focused its marketing efforts almost entirely toward physicians (Kravitz, 2000a). In the mid-1980s, marketing efforts by pharmaceutical companies began to shift to the consumer and the money spent on this endeavor only has increased since then. In fact, although consumer advertising is increasing rapidly, dollars spent on advertising in medical journals are decreasing, with consumer drug advertising accounting for 12% of a pharmaceutical company's promotional budget in 1998 (Berger, Kark, Rosner, Packer, & Bennett, 2001; Peters, 2001; Pines, 1998). The pharmaceutical industry spent \$1.8 billion in 2000 compared to \$55 million in 1991, which mainly was spent advertising just 50 different medications (Findlay, 2001; Huang, 2000). In fact, the pharmaceutical industry is expected to spend approximately \$7.5 billion by 2005, effectively quadrupling its current expenditure (Bell, Kravitz, & Wilkes, 2000).

### Key Points . . .

- ▶ Oncology nurses need to increase their awareness of direct-to-consumer (DTC) advertising of prescription medications because patients with cancer are exposed to increasing numbers of these advertisements in both broadcast and print media, as well as over the Internet.
- ▶ Nurses must anticipate patient-initiated dialogue regarding DTC advertised medication options, allowing patients to discuss DTC advertisements without fear of annoying healthcare providers.
- ▶ Although discussion of medication choices prompted by DTC advertising potentially may cause longer patient-provider encounters, this can result in a positive outcome, promoting reinforcement of lifestyle changes or symptom management strategies.

### Goal for CE Enrollees:

To enhance nurses' knowledge of direct-to-consumer (DTC) advertising for prescription medications and the implications DTC advertising has for patients with cancer.

### Objectives for CE Enrollees:

- On completion of this CE, the participant will be able to
1. Define DTC advertising.
  2. Discuss benefits and risks of DTC advertising.
  3. Describe nursing's role with patients inquiring about DTC advertised medications.

*Pamela Hallquist Viale, RN, MS, CS, ANP, OCN®, is an oncology nurse practitioner at Santa Clara Valley Medical Center in San Jose, CA. (Submitted July 2001. Accepted for publication November 12, 2001.) (Mention of specific products and opinions related to those products do not indicate or imply endorsement by the Oncology Nursing Forum or the Oncology Nursing Society.)*

Digital Object Identifier: 10.1188/02.ONF.505-513