

Is Public Perception of the Healthcare Industry at an All Time Low?

Dale Cormier,
Senior Vice-
President

Martin
Rouleau,
Vice-President

Carys
Papageorgiou,
Vice-President

Raoul Ramirez,
Account
Director

Martha Karras,
Account
Director

P\S\L Research
Canada

Prescription drugs play an important role in our lives and most people would agree that they have had a positive impact on the quality of life of the public in general. However, in the last several years, news about drug recalls and the safety of medications have skewed public opinion of the pharmaceutical industry and of regulatory bodies, such as the FDA and Health Canada, whose primary mandate is to ensure that “drugs on the market are safe and effective,” for patients and consumers alike.

Indeed, the relationship of trust between the pharmaceutical world and the end user has been compromised as a result of a number of recent clinical trials (primary endpoints) and some questionable meta-analyses which have resulted in large product recalls and events of concern:

- Almost 10 years ago, the FDA recalled obesity drugs from the market because they were linked to severe heart, lung damage and even deaths
- In 2001, Bayer withdrew Baycol, a cholesterol-lowering statin, from the market due to reports of occasional cardiovascular (CV) complications
- In 2004, Merck Frosst voluntarily withdrew Vioxx, a COX2 inhibitor, from the market due to CV safety concerns
- In 2007, Novartis withdrew two products from the market: Zelnorm (for the treatment of irritable bowel syndrome) and Prexige (a COX2 inhibitor) due to safety reasons
- In the last few years, there have been growing concerns about the safety of antidepressants, diabetes medications and even OTC medicines, such as children’s cough/cold medicines
- The healthcare community and patients have also seen several pharmaceutical advertisements pulled from the market due to misleading statements
- Most recently, the quality of Heparin produced in a Chinese manufacturing plant has been severely compromised, resulting in adverse events in 350 patients, including a number of deaths

The relationship of trust between the pharmaceutical world and the end user has been compromised as a result of a number of recent clinical trials and some questionable meta-analyses.

Table 1 How physicians deal with patient medication concerns	
Question: How do you deal with patients who come to you expressing concerns about their medication, based on information they have heard on the news?	
	% of physicians
Physician reviews information with patients (net)	58%
• Discusses their concerns/provides information	32%
• Listens and educates patients	14%
• Attempts to go over facts on the issue at hand	9%
Discuss validity of information (net)	25%
• Caution that it may not be valid information/sensationalistic	12%
• Discuss whether the source is scientific/what is their source of information?	14%
• Discuss validity of news report	9%
Discuss concerns and let patients decide (net)	24%
• Discusses pros and cons and let patient decide	13%
• Gives recommendation to help patients make an informed decision	7%
• Reviews current medical evidence and helps patients make a decision	5%
Physician does further research (net)	20%
• Assesses information before giving opinion	32%
Reassure patients, if possible	11%
Decide whether side-effects are relevant to the individual/ on an individual basis	11%

Base: All GPs (153)—weighted to national distribution

As a result of the high level of media attention surrounding these and other events, physicians have seen a marked increase in the number of patients requesting information on the drugs they are taking. Of even greater note is that patients are also expecting physicians to spend more time discussing options and or side-effects. In light of this growing concern amongst both healthcare professionals and the general public, what needs to be done to calm the wave of concern? How do we move in a more positive direction and how will this shape the future of the pharmaceutical world?

Although the full impact of some of these questions will only be answered in time, P\SL Research Canada recently conducted research with GPs, posing them a very basic

question: “How do you deal with patients who come to you expressing concerns about their medication, based on information they have heard/read in the news?”

Nationally (Table 1), it seems that physicians take a pro-active approach in dealing with patient concerns. Almost 60% will take the time to review the controversial information and then discuss this with the patient. Another 25% will discuss the validity of the information with patients, debating whether or not this information is correct. All being said, physicians are spending more and more time with patients discussing readily available public information and justifying their prescribing decision.

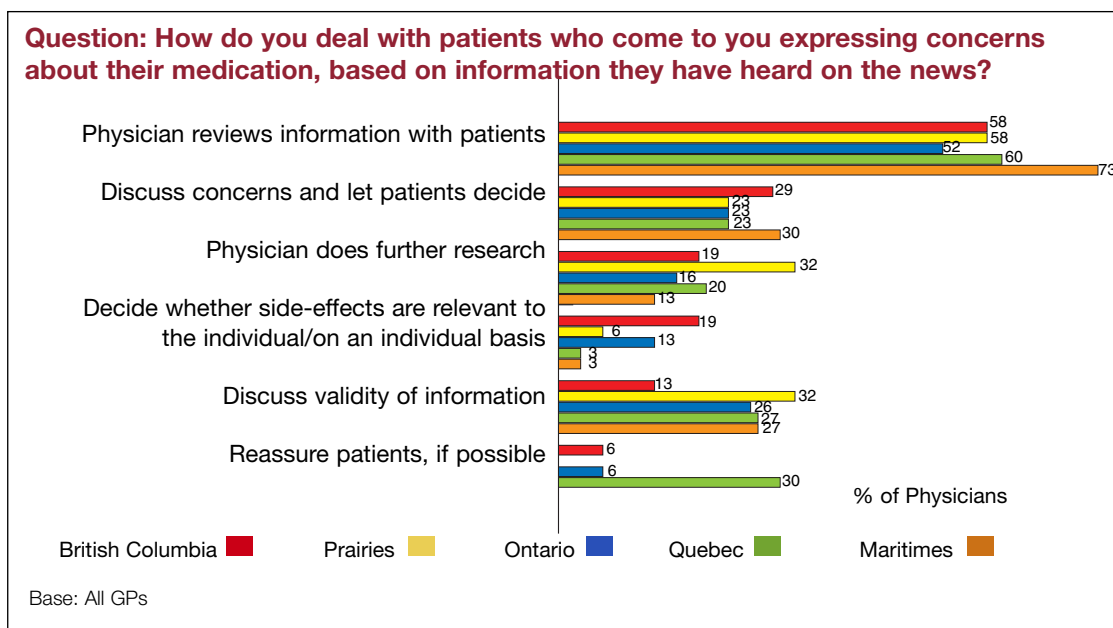


Figure 1. How physicians deal with patient medication concerns.

The question remains whether or not a physician's approach is sufficient to alleviate the concerns expressed by patients.

On a regional level (Figure 1), we see that physicians in Western Canada spend more time discussing patients concerns and furthering researching information themselves, while physicians in Ontario and Quebec seem to be more confident with decisions in their practice.

The question remains whether or not a physician's approach is sufficient to alleviate the concerns expressed by patients. Whether patients are satisfied with the physician-patient interaction and, in turn, are compliant with their medication, remains to be seen. If the medical community is to reverse the trend of negative perceptions, it must first turn to the patient and ask them how effective physicians have been in addressing their concerns. This will help to pinpoint areas in which the

pharmaceutical industry can help, whether by supporting the physician, or by directly addressing patients and patient groups/associations.

Despite recent setbacks, the benefits of many of the medications on the market are uncontested and a number of leading pharmaceutical companies continue to drive their growth by offering safe, effective products that are necessary if people are to live healthier, longer lives. Notwithstanding, patients' opinions and concerns will continue to have an impact. Now is the time for the industry to embrace these concerns and face them head-on in order to reverse the downward spiral of negativity that surrounds this proud industry. **CPM**

P\S\L Research conducts Online Omnibus Research with patients every two months where issues, such as these, can be investigated. For details on this service, please contact your P\S\L Research consultant today at (514) 938-2600.