

## Experience Is a Gloomy Lantern That Does Not Even Illuminate Its Bearer

Steinman<sup>1</sup> stressed that millions of people were early adopters of rofecoxib (Vioxx; Merck Co) and rosiglitazone (Avandia; GlaxoSmithKline), which were withdrawn or restricted for severe safety concerns. Accordingly, the findings of Schwartz and Woloshin<sup>2</sup> are very surprising. They showed evidence that a substantial proportion of the public mistakenly believes that the Food and Drug Administration approves only extremely effective drugs and drugs lacking serious adverse effects.<sup>2</sup> This deserves 2 questions.

What is the proportion of health care professionals who have similar misconceptions? The editor seems to think it is high because she published a piece to remind us of very basic principles.<sup>3</sup>

When will direct-to-consumer advertising (DTCA) be banned? It is time to close this Pandora's box opened in 1997. Indeed, spending on DTCA for prescription drugs in the United States has increased dramatically over the last decade, and the flow on the Internet is out of control.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, clinicians are not receptive to questions arising from DTCA.<sup>5</sup>

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## Conservative Prescribing and the Importance of Psychotherapy

We are very enthusiastic about the excellent article, "Principles of Conservative Prescribing" by Schiff et al,<sup>1</sup> which appeared in the September 12, 2011, issue of the *Archives*.<sup>1</sup> We plan to assign this article to all of our residents who are learning the principles of psychopharmacology. However, we were surprised to find that the article did not mention the thera-

peutic importance of psychotherapy. Even in the first principle, "seek nondrug alternatives first," there is mention only of "counseling" but not of psychotherapy itself. Given that selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors are among the most commonly prescribed drugs and that the majority of these prescriptions are written by primary care physicians (as opposed to psychiatrists), all physicians should be aware that (1) there is strong evidence that for many psychiatric disorders, psychotherapy alone is as effective as psychopharmacology alone, and (2) there is strong evidence that many (if not most) psychiatric disorders are best treated by a combination of psychotherapy and medication. Even though most primary care physicians are not trained in psychotherapy, they are in the unique position of seeing the most patients with psychiatric illness. All the more reason why psychotherapy should be high on the list when physicians are advised to "think beyond drugs."

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## In reply

It is unlikely that direct-to-consumer ads are going to be banned any time soon. This underscores the need to provide physicians and patients with independent, balanced information about the benefits, harms, and uncertainties of Food and Drug Administration (FDA)-approved prescription drugs. A number of groups have undertaken such efforts including academics,<sup>1</sup> policy groups,<sup>2</sup> and consumer organizations.<sup>3</sup> We have proposed that the FDA itself produce standardized 1-page summaries, called drug facts boxes, to provide the necessary information. On the basis of a body of evidence, including national randomized trials demonstrating that drug boxes improve patient decision making,<sup>4</sup> the FDA's Risk Communication Advisory Committee unanimously recommended that the FDA adopt the Drug Facts Box as the standard format for all communications. Unfortunately, the FDA has made no steps toward implementing this recommendation.<sup>5</sup> The rapid uptake of many newly approved drugs—often with minimal benefits over placebo and uncertain safety records—suggests physicians may also overinterpret the meaning of FDA approval in terms of drug efficacy and safety. Physicians clearly need better drug information also.

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