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P R E S S R E L E A S E

Direct-to-consumer advertising revisited by European commission, “Déjà-vu all over again”?

Amsterdam, 4 October 2006- The proposal to weaken the EU's ban on advertising prescription-only medicines to the public was overwhelmingly rejected by the European Parliament in 2004. Yet, only two years later the European Commission “openly regrets” this decision and calls for a reform of the European pharmaceutical products’ legislation. HAI Europe deplores this move to reopen the direct-to-consumer advertising debate.

Once again, the European Commission has established a body, the Pharmaceutical Forum, to address public health issues including the review of pharmaceuticals in the EU. Chaired by DG Health & Consumer Protection and DG Enterprise & Industry, the forum, which includes many representatives from the pharmaceutical industry, convened on 29 September.

As a follow-up activity, the European Parliament Health and Consumer Intergroup met yesterday in Brussels. At this gathering, it soon became clear that an underlying shift existed within the Forum to revisit direct-to-consumer advertising, under the pretence of discussing “information” to patients.

Throughout the discussion, Jorgo Chatzimarkakis, one of the three MEPs sitting in the Pharmaceutical Forum ‘s Steering Committee, alluded to the establishment of a public private partnership to provide patient “information” on prescription medicines. He explicitly mentioned the need to readdress Article 88, which outlines medicinal products’ advertising. Obviously, Mr Chatzimarkakis wants to rewrite the pharmaceutical legislation to favour direct-to-consumer advertising – or as he would have us believe, direct-to-consumer-information.

When confronted by Didier Rod, former French MEP, about the crushing defeat of the previous commission proposal to introduce DTCA, Mr. Chatzimarkakis firmly replied that “70% of the current MEPs were new to their positions”. In other words, he sees an opportunity to reopen the debate simply because sitting MEPs were not involved in 2004.

HAI's position is clear: due to inherent conflicts of interest which put sales and profit above public health, the pharmaceutical industry is in no position to provide the information people want, need and deserve; information that is unbiased, reliable and comparative.

HAI – Health Action International (HAI) is an independent, global network of over 200 consumer, health, development and other public interest groups involved in health and pharmaceutical issues in 70 countries worldwide. HAI works to increase access to essential medicines and improve their rational use. HAI actively promotes a more rational use of drugs and believes that all drugs marketed should meet real medical needs, have therapeutic advantages, be acceptably safe and offer value for money. More info: www.haiweb.org

ⁱ G.Verheugen, Vice-President of the European Commission responsible for Enterprise and Industry, Speech to the Pharmaceutical Forum, 29 September 2006