

To Prescribe or Not To Prescribe

In the past year, a few new drugs, namely sildenafil for sexual dysfunction, finasteride for male type baldness, and orlistat for obesity, have been launched in Hong Kong with great success in sales. They all share some common characteristics that are worth discussing.

These three drugs are not intended for any serious or life-threatening conditions. Their indications are very similar to those alternative medicines, the unscrupulous advertisement of which can easily be found in many of the tabloids or gossip magazines. Why are so many alternative medicines targeted at these indications? The answer is simple. They have a wide base of potential patients. With the marketing campaigns by world famous drug companies, a number of reliable clinical trials, and the blessing of FDA (USA), there is no wonder that these new drugs are selling like hot cakes. All these drugs are expensive and require long-term consumption. But then, who is going to pay the fee? There are different views as to whether the government (that is, taxpayers), or the insurance companies, should shoulder the costs for sexual dysfunction or hair loss. Genuine obesity, like hypercholesterolaemia, is a known risk for cardiovascular diseases. There is no doubt that it should be treated. However, should the drug be given to normal body weight patients who just do not want to gain weight? In the United States, several academic bodies and subspecialty boards are involved in setting the guidelines for the reimbursement of treatment fees. The

Society (HKSDV) has to prepare to take up this role in the future, when the need arises.

There had been some changes in the marketing strategies when these new drugs were launched. Traditionally, information about a new drug is first given to doctors. Through doctors' recommendation, the drug is prescribed to the patients. Nowadays, there is increasing use of the media to release first-hand information on new drugs. The media, including the Internet, have become a major distributor of drug information. Dermatologists often receive requests from patients for a new drug that is not yet launched locally. Unfortunately, some of the information released by the media is incomplete or incorrect, and may lead to misconceptions among patients. The illegal selling of drugs in Hong Kong also gives rise to cases whereby the patient without sexual dysfunction would take sildenafil, assuming that it is a sexual stimulant. At present, the role of doctors has changed from the first-hand drug information provider to a goalkeeper in many instances. Our job is not simply to ensure that the patients receive the appropriate treatment, but also to offer them a comprehensive and realistic picture of the different kinds of drugs.

The next millennium will arrive within a month's time. On behalf of the editorial board, I wish you all a happy and prosperous New Year.

Dr. C. N. Look

The Editorial Board

Wishes everyone a Merry X'mas

and a

Happy New Year 2000

