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Medical representative visits and opinion leaders: a declining versus a rising source of information for family doctors

Anne-Laure Pittet(1), A-F Chevalley(2), F Stiefel(3)

(1) IUHMSP, CHUV, University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland

(2) Federação Suisse des Psychologues (FSP), Pavia, Portugal

(3) Psychiatric Liaison Service, CHUV, University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland

Corresponding author: Dr Anne-Laure Pittet, University of Lausanne & Centre Hospitalier Universitaire Vaudois (CHUV), Institute of The History of Medicine & Public Health (IUHMSP, Lausanne, Switzerland. E-mail: Anne-Laure.Pittet@unil.ch

Background & Aim: Medical representative visits (MRVs) and opinion leaders (OLs) interventions are two of the major strategies used by the pharmaceutical industry to promote drugs and guide prescribing habits. Whereas MRV was the most powerful policy a decade ago, it is now declining. The use of so called “OLs” is a policy currently reaching a peak. This original qualitative study examines these two strategies in detail in the context of family medicine practice, using Swiss French speaking samples providing an interesting and relevant example.

Method: We conducted a qualitative content analysis of 22 semi-structured interviews with family doctors, experts in psychopharmacology (OLs) and medical sales representatives, complemented by direct observation of MRVs as well as educational events led by the experts.

Results: MRVs are seldom used by family doctors: 1 MRV/medical sales representative/family doctor. A necessary typologization of OLs was conducted to clarify their roles in the field of medicine: local, formal/informal, expert/peer and key OLs. Using this categorization, we found that our local OLs, identified from among the experts and not appointed by the pharmaceutical industry, are the main actors of mandatory continuing medical education (CME). They are the privileged source of information used by family doctors. Unlike MRVs, which impose a message on family doctors, local opinion leaders are used by family doctors as a proactive means of information to shape their prescribing behavior with intellectual independence. The quality of the delivered message, credibility of our local OLs, mandatory CME and changes in the drug market are discussed in relation to our results.

Conclusions: The main means of information to guide family doctors’ prescribing habits in our sample are the local OLs. Our results contribute to an understanding of why the pharmaceutical industry is increasingly approaching local OLs to use them as marketing tools.