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HEAD Nepal

Editorial

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Advertisement in Medical Journal – to be or not to be!

Medical journals are unbiased and reliable sources of information. They disseminate knowledge to educate medical practitioners and scientists of new development in different fields of medical science. The state of research and publication in developing countries is primitive, and those that are done fail to compete to be published in reputed international journals. The regional open access journals provide an opportunity to such researchers in disseminating their work. Their work is then recorded and available for other researchers and practitioners for reference.

Open access journals are good platform, but it is a tremendous task for journals to survive with the little or no resource. Common sources of revenue are sales of print version and article publication charges which are often inadequate. Survival is hard and journals have to look for other sources such as individual donations and fund from institutions or medical societies. One of such journal is PloS Medicine, which has a reputable presence. These alternative sources of income may not be available for all journals and have to turn to advertisements as a major source of revenue. Even some of the reputed traditional, subscription-based journals put advertisements as their reliable source of income.

The policies of accepting advertisements are different for different journals.¹⁻³ Most of the journals restrict them to those products and information that are directly related to medical science. Others such as advertisements of commodities like food, beverages, and tours are less attracted to medical journals as their aim to reach larger circulations is limited. For this reason, most of the advertisements are from pharmaceutical companies.

Advertisement of drugs and medical devices in a medical journal is often frowned upon and said to endanger the independence of medical journals as they have poor educational value, are biased, and may have a conflict of interest.¹ Pharmaceutical companies are attracted as they can target the attention of prescribing practitioners. The impact of such advertisements favors pharmaceutical companies. Evidence show increase in prescription of promoted drugs though doctors claim that they have no or little impact on their prescribing behavior.⁴ The benefit was measured and said to be around USD 2.43 for each dollar spent on medical journal advertisement in the first four years and that they rise to more than USD 4.0 after that period.⁵

Advertisements from pharmaceutical companies are biased towards promoting specific brands of drugs, and they are designed as reminders to reinforce the product prescription. Low quality of journal advertising is a global issue. These advertisements provide only brand and generic names and indications but do not mention risks and contraindications.^{2,5} The message to endorse the product even quote previous studies to support their claim.

The validity of the information and claims though supported by bibliography citing published studies are doubtful. They can be misleading and can lead to improper prescribing practices if not properly revised before publication.^{3,5} Herxheimer et al had done a 12 - month survey of information content and standards of adverts in leading medical journals in 18 countries including Nepal in 1988.² The advertisements gave poor and often misleading information and were intended only to attract attention to the brand name. Many studies have since been done and most of the studies criticize advertisements in the medical journal for the same reason.⁵

The advertisements do change the prescribing behavior of unsuspecting prescribers so it is crucial that these advertisements be reviewed by researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to maintain a high quality of the advertisements. Reputed journals though accept advertisements from pharmaceutical companies have well-written policies which start with clearly written disclaimer.^{6,7}



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Readers of medical journals are professionals who should critically judge the content of not only the articles but also claims of the promotions though they are accompanied by bibliographical references to studies published in reputable medical journals^{8,9}

The role of the editorial board is crucial in protecting the readers from unsubstantiated claims. The readers should be able to easily differentiate scientific articles from adverts and the purpose of the adverts. This can be done by a difference in location, layout, color, or other visual cues. The journal should also develop advertisement policies and review the advertisements submitted.

It is desired that the information given in the adverts are clear, accurate, balanced, and provide adequate information for the readers to make their own judgment. The evidence cited should be up-to-date, relevant and not misleading in any way. This information is essential for the prescribers to make their fair judgment for optimal use of the medicine or medical devices.

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