
A GLOBAL VIEW OF SELF-CARE WITHIN HEALTH POLICY

What self-care means to medical doctors

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Mr Chairman, Madame Director-General, Mr Commissioner, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first state that we, the doctors, support and find valuable the increased practice of self-medication. Patients, citizens, have always taken a primary responsibility for their own health. In earlier years through the use of traditional cures and remedies. Nowadays, increased and successful scientific research and a higher general level of knowledge in the population have given the ordinary citizen a chance to take greater responsibility for his/her own medication.

The development of a stronger role for patients is a common trend in all industrialised countries. Legislation is changed to give patients a more direct role in choosing a provider of their liking, and patients also have the right to information that is given in such a language that it is understandable yet thorough. Patients have the right to decide, after having been properly informed, of what diagnostic or therapeutic actions, if any, should be taken.

Patients also have a right to a second opinion when they are confronted with decisions that affect their wellbeing and/or long-term survival.

The changes in the legislation that we have seen in several countries are certainly matched by a daily assertiveness, a daily participation on the part of patients in all decisions concerning their treatment and wellbeing. Patients today have an ever-increasing reluctance to take no for an answer and that is basically a good thing.

This new role, where patients no longer accept to be the object of decisions taken by doctors or others working in health care – but where they want to be the subject in all matters concerning their own treatment and wellbeing – shows us that patients are ready, able and willing to play a greater part in the treatment of their own diseases and illnesses. Thus, self-medication has come to stay and the importance of self-medication will increase in the years to come.

The medical profession has a positive view on a strengthened role for patients in prevention and management of their ailments. We believe that a greater responsibility taken by patients can lead to a greater awareness of the importance of prevention and lifestyle changes, when necessary. The more patients take on this greater responsibility, the more they are likely to see the connection between a healthier lifestyle and an increased number of years of wellbeing.

We also believe that a greater role for patients in health care, and a greater role for self-care in health care, can lead to a decrease in demand for consultations concerning some of the more mundane problems that occur in patients' lives. I do not think that this will lead to a decrease in overall demand for consultations, but I believe that the mix will be different. Doctors will have the possibility to allocate more time to the patients that are in a greater need of help while patients with minor ailments can, when properly informed, address their problems through self-care and self-medication.

Thus, I do not think that increased self-medication will save money for the health care systems in the short term. I do believe, however, that the positive effects of self-medication for health care systems are that doctors can increasingly give high-quality help to the more needy patients – thus being able to add more value to the lives of patients with more serious diseases or illnesses.

I also believe that the empowerment of patients, where self-medication is just one part, gives the patient a stronger role to play in society. The empowerment also means that the relationships between lifestyle and wellbeing, between disease, illness and cure, are demystified and more easily understood by the ordinary citizen.

The more one can grasp and understand how one can influence one's own life, the more one can actually take charge of one's own life.

The more relationships are demystified, the more one is able to participate as a full citizen in our democratic societies, and that is a very worthwhile development in itself. Politicians as well as the medical profession and

others who are used to taking responsibility on behalf of the ordinary citizens, we must all yield to let the citizens, the patients, play the role that they should in our societies.

Does increased self-medication have any downside? Can increased self-medication be detrimental to the health of the patients?

Well, yes of course it can. Yet, in all societies we have local consumer protection laws that decide what prescription drugs can be sold in that country, and what is the required knowledge for a physician, a nurse, etc. All these items have been enacted in order to protect the sick and needy patients from being preyed upon by unscrupulous providers claiming to have cures for everything from baldness to the most aggressive forms of cancer.

Consumer protection is as important in self-medication as in all health care. For self-medication this means that the citizens should have the right to information that is truthful and not misleading, that helps them come to a correct decision but is not oversimplified, that does not give unjustified promises or otherwise glorifies the product in an inappropriate way. With a well-balanced information, the citizen has a chance to take on the role that he/she should have. But, if the information does not give the whole truth, citizens have been misled and have not been given a fair chance to act in accordance with their interests.

Thus, the information concerning all self-medication products has to be truthful and not misleading, because otherwise patients might inappropriately treat serious diseases or illnesses with self-medication products and delay a much-needed visit to their doctor. If symptoms persist, if the condition worsens or recurs worse than before, if there is severe pain, if there are unexpected side effects, or if there are psychological problems of a non-banal nature, then the patient should always be advised to see his or her doctor.

I want to stress this most strongly: self-medication is a help for patients to run their own lives but we must never give the patients the impression that serious disorders can be treated without the help and assistance of highly educated and motivated doctors, nurses and other health professionals.

So it is important when giving information to see to it that patients understand that they should never delay a visit to their doctor. "When in doubt, call your doctor."

Self-medication can also mask symptoms, so that patients do not recognise correctly the symptoms they have. Again, this is a question of appropriate information.

Self-medication can also lead to interference with other ongoing medication. Thus, it is always important that patients should be able to discuss their self-medication questions when seeing their doctor and that they ask their pharmacist when buying self-medication drugs as to possible interference with ongoing prescribed medication.

Non-prescription medicines can also be misused, abused or overused creating side effects that can lead to a

need for hospitalisation or other costs for society from loss of days of work, etc.

Again, the importance of information that is truthful and not misleading cannot be overemphasised. In order to strengthen the patient's possibilities of being well informed, I believe it is very important that the self-medication industry informs the medical profession thoroughly about all non-prescription products. Patients will be advised by their doctor as to the availability of non-prescription medicines and patients will also need to have confirmation as to the advisability of taking non-prescription medications for their problems.

If the industry decides to convey all the information concerning non-prescription medicines directly to the medical profession, this will also help reduce the risk for too many promises being given about the effects of the medication. The advertising can thus become more appropriate and truthful. The medical profession can easily see through the hype that is sometimes too abundant in non-prescription medicine advertising.

The World Medical Association and the World Self-Medication Industry are preparing a joint statement on self-medication in which we will define the circumstances where we believe self-medication is appropriate.

From the point of view of the medical profession, as I stated earlier, self-medication is seen as something positive, but patients must be given the chance to come to a correct decision through information that is accurate, appropriate and truthful.

Self-medication should be used to treat minor ailments, with the full responsibility on the part of the patient for his or her own treatment. However, the medical profession, pharmacists and the self-medication industry have a very important role to play in providing assistance and in giving, advice and information to patients about self-medication and the availability of non-prescription medicines.

The medical profession feels that self-medication normally should be used when treating short-term ailments.

Mr Chairman, the World Self-Medication Industry and the World Medical Association both have an interest in seeing responsible self-medication develop throughout the world. We both have an interest in seeing to it that patients are well-informed and thus able to take rational decisions and play the pivotal role that they should in managing their own lives. Let us continue this work together to try and find the right balance in the information given to patients concerning self-medication.

Let us continue to work together to find the right balance concerning what medicines should, at any particular time, be classified as non-prescription.

Let us continue to work together on these issues, and then we can see to it together that the trend towards patient empowerment continues to the benefit of the citizens and the societies in which we live.



