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## SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC VALUE: TWO SIDES OF THE SELF-MEDICATION COIN

# The socio-economic importance of self-medication

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*For the last few years, society in the Western industrialised countries has been in the throes of a revolution that is affecting all aspects of everyday life and which has important implications for the self-medication industry which we represent. Nothing is as it was before:*

*The individual has become more mobile and adapts his/her lifestyle to suit the opportunities he/she is offered or which he/she needs to assert himself/herself in society. Associated catch phrases include choice of workplace, structuring of daily life and expansion of personal horizons beyond national boundaries.*

People are better informed. An explosion in communications technology serves access to knowledge. Every seven years, the world's knowledge base doubles in size. The media infiltrate every corner of the earth. And every section of society can have a share in this. This has important implications for the personal development of the individual. The Internet alone has skyrocketed in popularity in a few years, and the impact on users has been enormous. They can decide from their own homes whether to receive information, what kind of information they receive and how it will be used. This also extends beyond all national boundaries.

Being better informed goes hand in hand with an increased feeling of self worth and a need to be free to make one's own decisions.

People are getting older, with everything that brings with it: age-related diseases are on the increase, yet people want to maintain the lifestyle and standard of living to which they have become accustomed. A lifetime of experience marks the behaviour of these people.

Conclusion: People in industrialised countries have come of age. They decide for themselves what they want.

Self-determination is the word that best characterises the way of life of people living in Western democracies.

This freedom to make decisions naturally goes hand in hand with people taking responsibility for and keeping a check on themselves.

The communication society creates informed individuals by promoting:

- Worldwide access to all knowledge
- Personal development
- Sense of responsibility
- Increasing sense of self worth

In relation to healthcare systems, this means:

- The individual is informed about most of the services available.
- He is not only used to participating in the decision-making process and making his own decisions about what healthcare products he wants to use – he is now starting to demand it.
- He is correspondingly willing to take responsibility for himself and to keep a check on himself.

And with this comes naturally an increased focus on self-medication with medicines that the individual knows, is informed about and which he can use himself to treat minor conditions or for prevention.

This is why self-medication ranks so highly in countries like e.g. the Federal Republic of Germany despite all the legal obstacles and red tape put in its path:

- 92 percent of Germans use self-medication.

- Last year, they spent around DM 15 billion on self-medication products.

The individual is also well informed about the medicines he buys himself without a doctor's prescription, in Germany e.g.

- 92 percent read the Patient Information Leaflet.
- 82 percent ask for a medicine of their choice in the pharmacy.
- 64 percent of the citizens are very familiar with the medicines they buy as self-medication.

In many countries, both pharmacists and doctors also perform an advisory role in the consultancy of their patients.

Despite these findings, which emerged from a survey of 10 000 Germans carried out last year by the GPI Institute of Communication Research, there are still those who, in certain political groups, concentrate still more on the risks posed by self-medication rather than focus on the benefits. Such attitudes are based on a flawed view of society. Ideologically speaking, they are stuck in the last century.

Self-medication has clearly become worldwide one of the central pillars within the healthcare systems. That has many positive consequences. I maintain that if it had not been for the private market for self-medication medicines in its current shape, it would have become necessary to introduce rationing into the healthcare market some years ago (with all the unfair and unsatisfactory consequences this would bring).

Allow me to go into the German situation in slightly more detail:

In this country, the discussion has just come round again to a new healthcare reform. According to the Federal Government, it will probably be voted on by the end of the year, when we will be able to celebrate a unique anniversary: It will be the 50th major body of healthcare legislation in the last 25 years, during which time around 7000 individual laws and regulations have been introduced.

This new healthcare reform again documents the great difficulties being faced by all healthcare systems.

- In Germany, as in all industrialised countries, something must be done to stem the growing tide of healthcare costs if we are to ease the mandatory burden on the individual – not forgetting employers, who in this country finance 50 percent of the contributions.

Statutory health insurance now costs around DM 270 billion per year in Germany. About 13.5 percent of an employee's income has to go on statutory health insurance alone, and the tendency is rising.

Legislation restricting the services provided is no longer enough on its own to rescue the health service. Important Services are already being rationed. This trend is set to increase in future:

- The various healthcare systems will have to increasingly focus their efforts on severe and chronic diseases. It is no longer possible to finance the treatment of minor ailments and complaints or certain aspects of preventive care.

- The treatment and prescribing habits of all service providers will be monitored more closely in a bid to cut costs.

- Restrictive measures will prevent more and more service providers from operating within the health service.

A typical example in Germany is the fact that so called "white lists" are being drawn up for medicines. These lists are supposed to contain only those medicines which are reimbursed. The debate surrounding this has now spilled over into the public arena and all involved parties.

Added to this is a medicines budget that has been frozen down for years. It means that action can be taken against a doctor if he spends more than a certain pre-established amount of money on prescribed medicines.

The doctors themselves have adapted to the extremely strict monitoring of their prescriptions. As many as 24 percent of all doctors no longer limit themselves to prescribing prescription-only medicines. They advise their patients to buy their own medicines.

This healthcare reform could, however, turn out to be self-medication's finest hour (unfortunately probably only in theory, because there are still too many political obstacles in Germany) and turn on a new thinking. In the general risk pool, the insured individual pays out in return for the promise of help in the event of a life emergency, e.g. if he becomes severely ill. He could easily be given complete responsibility for purchasing and paying the self-medication products he knows and trusts to treat minor ailments, if he wants and decides to do so.

A policy such as this would be in line with the social trend. At the same time, a healthcare market such as this would assure the future of the statutory health insurance system supported jointly by employers and employees:

- The general risk pool could also continue to finance developments in medical technology with its price increases.
- The cost of minor illnesses would be covered by the patient and individual himself. His freedom to make his own decisions would be enhanced, as would acceptance of political decisions.
- The patient would also become more responsible for his own health – if the political system would finally let him have this responsibility. It is more than absurd, for example, that an individual who is capable of taking responsibility for planning holiday trips to the other side of the world has to be told what to do to treat a headache or the cold that comes back year after year (after all, each one of us gets about 2 to 3 colds a year on average).

The paying member of a statutory health insurance scheme is thus disempowered. At the same time, the costs of health insurance are driven irresponsibly upwards. The end result is that the health service is more quickly made artificially impossible to finance – for no good reason.

While all this is happening, the individual, as I have already mentioned, is dealing responsibly with over-the-counter medicines. In Germany the annual turnover of

DM 15 billion in the self-medication market eases the burden on the statutory health insurance system. At the same time, the market for over-the-counter medicines has an even more far-reaching cost-reducing effect in that it breaks the vicious and costly circle of events in the health service:

The patient goes to the doctor, where he has to wait 45 minutes on average for a consultation which takes an average of 13.2 minutes. The patient then goes to the pharmacy to pick up a prescribed medicine. At least two hours have therefore gone by before this patient is back in his home or work place – just for a mild cold.

This example gives a clear picture of the true economic costs involved. It is not just the doctor's fee and the costly process of settling with the health insurer – administrative costs are also incurred when the pharmacist bills the health insurer. Last but not least, the time factor helps to bump up costs, with the patient having to sacrifice at least two hours of his time. Economic costs which, incidentally, have never been brought into the equation in the past, but which have to be financed by the employer.

German doctors process about 700 million health service entitlement vouchers a year from patients. This means that there are 700 million consultations with ill individuals. It has been calculated, however, that generally only 20 percent of these patients are seriously ill. It must therefore be assumed that more than hundreds of million of consultations taking place in doctors' practices are with patients who have minor ailments.

If the number of consultations could be reduced by just 100 million – possibly by means of self-medication with no harm to the patient – a saving of around DM 18 billion could be achieved if the political will would be there.

So let us remember the situation I have described in detail using Germany as an example, although most of it applies to all industrialised countries:

- The individual wants to be able to make his/her own decisions.
- The customer in the pharmacy knows his/her medicines and how to use them.
- The statutory public health insurance system would be completely overstretched if it were not for the self-medication market.

In Goethe's Faust, there is a famous scene where Gretchen says "Please tell me what religion means to you". What we clearly need to do is turn this round and tell the politicians and the national administrations: "Please tell us what self-medication means to you

Time and time again, we find a relationship between national organisations and the political system that is not in keeping with the new sociological conditions prevailing in our society.

Words reflecting this keep cropping up time and again in legal codes. They evoke restrictions, red tape and a patronising attitude towards the individual. This happens not only in national parliaments and with national authorities, but even in the administration of the EU

authorities. The pharmaceutical industry in Europe has had to learn that the hard way over the past few years.

Self-medication is stuck in the middle of this social process, which is characterised on the one hand by social progress and personal responsibility of the individual and on the other by political braking manoeuvres. If it is to maintain its position of increasing importance to the healthcare system and to patients, self-medication must bridge the gap in this society between positive consumer decision-making and retrograde national regulations.

In this process, the politicians will be going down a road which can only lead to failure if they talk down to individuals and do not give them the freedom to make their own decisions and to determine their own quality of life. The alienation between state and society has taken root in many areas. There is less acceptance of legislation. People are forced to adopt a strategy of evasion which threatens the solidarity which is vital to society.

And it is becoming increasingly easy for people to find ways around national administrative constraints. Communication across frontiers makes this possible. We got our first taste of this in the last few months, when a number of "lifestyle" products came onto the pharmaceutical market.

Even in the most remote corners of the world, the media made sure that the message got through. Information about these products got onto the Internet and these lifestyle products were offered all over the world. And anyone who wanted them was able to get hold of them, whether or not they had been approved by the regulatory authorities in their country. The globalisation of our trade in goods and services made this possible. I am not arguing that this should or has to be accepted, but it is a fact of life.

Whether we like it or not, we have to live with these changes in future. If the state intervenes with regulations, the bureaucratic impediments can and will be circumnavigated via the Internet. The laws of the global market with its international network of communications are no longer determined by national governments alone.

We, to make that very clear, do want distribution of medicines and the self-medication market to remain regulated, however, and for it to be used responsibly by manufacturers and consumers. But this means that we ourselves must maintain or maybe even improve certain standards in order to meet society's expectations.

The two most important expectations are of course self-evident: OTC products must be of high-quality and they must be safe for the consumers.

The safety of our products has been demonstrated repeatedly and is ensured by many high standard procedures (e.g. GMP, GCP etc.)

Beside the safety of the products, the same level of importance targets the products' high quality standard, i.e.:

- Self-medication products must be manufactured to exacting standards of quality.
- The quality must be verifiable.
- The patient information must be appropriate and there must be a way of checking it.

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Quality-controlled production of such products by the pharmaceutical industry is the only real way of guaranteeing that they survive into the future and represent an alternative or adjunct to prescription-only medicines.

We accept and want the individual to make his/her own decisions. However, the informed consumer is not only entitled to but demands to be given high-quality products.

Above all, however, pharmaceutical products presented in this way offer the most reliable means of ensuring that the self-medication market secures from the politicians the place it needs within the healthcare system.

Because we need to do away with the administrative stumbling blocks, we ask the politicians to help the consumer and the pharmaceutical industry to meet their responsibilities. We can no longer tolerate politicians restricting the self-medication market by over-regulating and treating the consumer inappropriately.

It is time that Europe faces the future, which means to empower the market forces, also in the healthcare system.

What are our main requests?

1. The obstacles for registering and using OTC products are still too great.
2. We must bring a broader range of indications into the OTC discussion than has been the case before. A point in question here is primary prevention in its various forms.
3. Advertising restrictions in a society with access to international communications is antiquated, outdated and no longer workable. We are calling on the soon to be installed European Commission to create new freedoms in this area. The individual has a right to truthful information and the pharmaceutical manufacturers have a duty to provide that information. It is about time the freedom of manufacturers to inform patients on the basis of confirmed scientific findings is restored.
4. The transition from newly authorised medicines (which therefore have to be prescribed) to over-the-counter medicines should be simplified across the board, with the patient's safety naturally remaining the uppermost priority.
5. In Germany and other countries, we have two types of OTC products on the market, those that can be reimbursed and those that are not. This coexistence has historical reason. We think that this should also be made clear and an additional distinction being drawn between OTC-products and prescription-only medicines. This distinction is simple: prescription-only medicines are reimbursable – OTC products can be purchased freely in the pharmacy.

Allow me to finally draw your attention to another political requirement which has something to do with the current debate surrounding the healthcare reform in Ger-

many. The draft versions of the reform address the question of patient protection and propose to extend the rights of the patient. The objective should be a patients' charter.

No cause for disagreement there. But patient rights also means giving the consumer the power to make his/her own decisions, to purchase the healthcare products he/she wants and needs to maintain his/her quality of life. Therefore:

- The patient's right to self-determination should be anchored in the patients' charter, including in relation to self-medication.

The socio-economic importance of self-medication has many facets. It is inseparably linked to social progress. It is caught up in the communicative and economic globalisation across frontiers. And in context it represents an alternative to the regulatory maze of the various healthcare systems.

#### Conclusion:

- **Strengthen the right of the citizens to buy the OTC-medication of their choice**
- **Removal of certain regulatory restrictions on advertising, registration, re-registration and switching**
- **Give the manufacturers more rights to inform the public truthfully about their products**

In conclusion, I would like to underline the fact that the manufactures of OTC medicines provide safe products of guaranteed quality for empowered citizens capable of making their own decisions. They thus reduce the burden on the various health cost reimbursement systems. To ensure that self-medication is able to continue its function in a still changing environment it is up to the politicians to create the necessary framework, and this includes:

- The right of the patients to decide to buy the OTC-medication of their choice, and
- The removal of all regulatory restrictions currently standing in the way of the first point. This means, among other things, reducing the restrictions on advertising and obstacles to registration and re-registration – especially for well know traditional medicines – and giving manufactures the right to inform patients truthfully about their products.

For the patient who is capable of making informed, responsible decisions, self-medication is a necessary component of healthcare policy now and in the future.