

Some have administered excessive dosages of potent anti-arthritis drugs, resulting in serious or lethal damage to the blood-forming tissues.

These and similar prescribing blunders, now thoroughly documented by Latin American hematologists, pathologists and other experts, do not mean that Latin American physicians and pharmacists are poorly trained, poorly motivated or unable or unwilling to keep up-to-date. Some of the health care rendered in the Latin American countries is fully comparable to the best medicine practiced in Washington, Boston, London or Stockholm. On the other hand, some medical care rendered in Latin America is as poor as the worst practiced in the United States.

Instead, this misuse of drugs in Latin America— and also in such other countries as Spain, Egypt, India and Taiwan —appears to be a reflection of the astounding drug promotion and drug labeling disseminated to physicians and pharmacists by much of the pharmaceutical industry. In this "educational" material furnished by many drug companies, the efficacy or usefulness of the drugs is too often grossly exaggerated, and the possible hazards are minimized, glossed over or totally omitted.

Or, the promotion may essentially warn the physician, "This drug may produce nose stuffiness," while failing to mention, "This drug may kill your patient."

In our investigation we compared the promotional material furnished to physicians in the United States and Latin America on 26 well-known,

widely used prescription drug products marketed under 40 different brand names by 23 global pharmaceutical firms. Some of these companies were based in the United States. Others had their headquarters in Switzerland, France or West Germany.

In the United States, where drug promotion and labeling is under the strict control of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), each company is required to limit its claims of usefulness to those that can be supported by substantial scientific evidence. All potential hazards must be clearly disclosed, and occasionally FDA requires the warnings to be printed in extra large type.

In the Latin American countries, however, a different situation prevails, and the companies generally say whatever they want to say.

One of the most notable cases has involved the antibiotic chloramphenicol, marketed in many countries by many different companies.