

APPENDIX II

[From the Virginia Medical Monthly, vol. 93, August 1966, pp. 459-461]

TEACHING THE EVALUATION OF DRUG ADVERTISING TO MEDICAL STUDENTS

(By D. R. H. Gourley, Ph. D., professor of pharmacology, University of Virginia School of Medicine, Charlottesville, Va.)

Physicians until the present have developed their own methods for evaluating the advertising of pharmaceutical manufacturers. Now a course is being given in medical school to prepare the student for this task.

From time to time, spokesmen for the pharmaceutical industry have attempted to justify the expenditure of heavy sums for the advertising of prescription drugs to a limited group as "postgraduate education of the doctor." The character of drug advertising in the United States today under regulation by the Food and Drug Administration(6) has improved considerably since the abuses described by May(5) and others. However, there is reason to believe that many physicians in private practice have been introduced to a large proportion of the drugs they are now prescribing by communications from the pharmaceutical manufacturers. Baehr(1) noted that many general practitioners and specialists in his experience were motivated to shift from one drug to another by the persuasive propaganda of advertising literature and by visiting representatives of manufacturers.

It is clearly desirable for the physician to have a set of guidelines by which he can evaluate the claims that will be made for drugs introduced to the therapeutic scene in the years following graduation from medical school. The course in pharmacology appears to be a logical place to begin to introduce such guidelines and studies of the evaluation of drug advertising have been initiated in the pharmacology courses in some medical schools.(2,3) Typically, a program of drug advertising evaluation is modified in some details from year to year, but the principles can be illustrated by a description of the program most recently undertaken with second year medical students in the Department of Pharmacology at the University of Virginia School of Medicine.

The objectives of the evaluation of drug advertising (EDA) program were: (1) to develop in the medical student a skeptical attitude towards advertising claims for new drugs; (2) to provide the medical student with training and experience in the evaluation of these claims and with some knowledge of the reliability of various authorities. The practical exercise of the EDA program was limited to direct mail advertising although it is recognized that this is only one of several channels through which drugs are advertised. To obtain the necessary material, three cooperating physicians saved all of the drug advertisements and samples received through the mail during the three-month period immediately preceding the project. The program was scheduled during the latter part of the pharmacology course after the students had completed their study of drugs which affect the central nervous system, autonomic nervous system, cardiovascular system and kidney. The mass of accumulated mail was gleaned for material advertising drugs in these general categories. Most of the drugs were relatively new but a few older agents were included for balance. Advertised material that included literature references was selected in preference to poorly documented brochures. Although this bias favored the advertising material, it was a necessary concession in order to provide the students with certain leads.

The class was divided into 18 groups of four students each. Therefore, 18 drugs were chosen. All of the available direct mail advertising for one drug was given to one group for their analysis.

At a preliminary session, the students were given their assignment and instructions for the program. The peculiar features of drug advertising and the relative role of direct mail advertising in overall drug promotion were discussed. The volume of drug samples received through the mail during the collection period was dramatized by emptying a large galvanized can containing the drug

NOTE.—Numbered references at end of article.