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Reducing Pharmaceutical Industry Influence

Key Takeaways

- Pharmaceutical marketing is a significant factor in the growing public health crisis of medication overload, which puts millions of older adults at risk of preventable harm and premature death.
- Drug advertising targeting consumers and prescribers needs better regulation to improve transparency and ensure complete information about a medicine's potential risks and benefits, especially when marketing medications to older adults.
- Health care professional organizations, patient advocacy groups, and health care institutions should lead efforts to curb the pharmaceutical industry's influence in American medical culture.

The Dangerous Influence of the Pharmaceutical Industry

Most Americans see the use of multiple medications as a natural part of aging, and drugs can offer patients many benefits. But each additional drug a person takes increases the risk of suffering serious, sometimes even deadly harm. Every day, 750 Americans age 65 and older are hospitalized due to a serious side effect associated with taking multiple medications. Despite the well-documented harms of medication overload, most policymakers, health care leaders, and patients are unaware of the severity of this issue and the role of pharmaceutical companies in driving it.

Pervasive drug advertising heavily promotes the benefits of costly medications while downplaying the risk of harm, perpetuating the idea that there is a "pill for every ill" and contributing to the American culture of prescribing. The pharmaceutical industry spends billions of dollars in marketing to consumers and prescribers, resulting in inappropriate prescribing that can—and does—lead to patient harm, particularly among older adults. **To counter the dangerous influence of industry, drug advertising needs to be better regulated** so that clinicians, patients, and families receive balanced and complete information about the potential benefits and harms associated with specific medications, medication interactions, and medication overload.

Medication overload occurs when a person is taking multiple medications that may pose a greater chance of harm than benefit.

Harm from medication overload includes delirium, falls, strokes, and other events that can be life-threatening.

The Threat of Medication Overload and Adverse Drug Events (ADEs)

5 million older adults sought medical attention for ADEs in 2018

42% of older adults take 5 or more prescription medications

There was a 200% increase in polypharmacy over 20 years

280,000 hospitalizations in 2018 due to ADEs

$62 billion in unnecessary hospitalizations over 10 years

150,000 premature deaths in next 10 years due to ADEs

Regulating Direct-to-Consumer Advertising

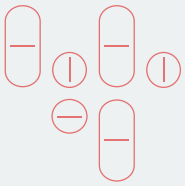
Even though direct-to-consumer drug advertisements may help some patients become more involved in their health care, substantial evidence shows misleading marketing harms patients by increasing unnecessary prescriptions, spending on drugs, and avoidable adverse drug events. A national ban on direct-to-consumer advertising (DTCA) would be an effective way to reduce medication overload, though it would be difficult to achieve. Partial legislative bans on DTCA at the state level or for specific drugs—like those known to be risky for older adults—could be more feasible to enact.

Additionally, agencies like the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) could take regulatory action to mandate more complete and balanced advertising that would put a drug's potential benefits and harms in context for consumers. For example, advertisers could be required to disclose whether a drug has been tested in older adults. Public pressure on agencies to prohibit misleading and harmful advertising could increase the possibility of regulatory action. Public campaigns could also pressure media companies not to run misleading drug advertisements.

Stopping Marketing to Prescribers

Pharmaceutical companies also target health care professionals. Industry sales representatives visit clinics, hospitals, and physician practices to promote their products and provide free samples. These visits, which often include gifts such as free meals or branded merchandise in addition to drug samples, significantly influence a doctor's prescribing habits. Sharing free samples with patients almost always leads to a full prescription of the medication. Pharmaceutical companies spend $20 billion annually on this form of marketing, called "detailing."

To reduce industry's influence on prescribing, drug samples given to offices should be subject to the same federal reporting requirements as other gifts. This could be done by closing a loophole in the Physician Payments Sunshine Act, which currently excludes samples from the requirement that medical product manufacturers must publicly report payments made to physicians or teaching hospitals. Furthermore, health institutions should establish policies to restrict access of sales representatives, which has been found to reduce prescribing of detailed drugs, and promote their "pharma-free" status to assure patients that their practice values transparency and independence.



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Taking Action to Eliminate Medication Overload

Legislative or regulatory action to restrict or ban DTCA and industry detailing would have the greatest impact, but there are difficult political and financial barriers to overcome. Immediate action could come from advocacy groups such as Public Citizen and clinician organizations such as the American Medical Association or nursing unions, who should collectively pressure government organizations to ensure drug advertisements contain complete and balanced information. Additionally, medical professional societies, patient safety organizations, and health care institutions should demand transparency around clinicians' and institutions' relationships to industry and support a shift in medicine's cultural norms. Without such grassroots action, progress on reducing industry influence will be slow or nonexistent, leaving millions of older adults at risk of serious harm from medication overload.

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This issue brief is part of a project funded by the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation and conducted by the Lown Institute. A report, *Medication Overload: America's Other Drug Problem*, quantifies the growing harm older Americans face from taking too many medications. The Lown Institute's subsequent publication, *National Action Plan for Eliminating Medication Overload*, provides detailed descriptions of our recommendations and citations for this issue brief.