

## Health Information or Advertising? Disease Awareness Campaigns in Latvia

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**Introduction.** European legislation prohibits direct-to-consumer advertising of prescription-only pharmaceutical products, but allows manufacturers to provide information on health and diseases. Information campaigns that discuss symptoms or a disease and which direct the public to visit doctors are referred to as disease awareness campaigns. With some exceptions, such as the Netherlands or the United Kingdom, most EU countries do not have specific regulations governing disease awareness campaigns. Well-crafted disease awareness campaigns may be beneficial, as they provide disease information and encourage the public to seek medical advice. However, there is a risk that such campaigns can be used to promote diagnostics and treatments unnecessarily and thus increase use of prescription-only medicines.

**Aim, Materials and Methods.** Aim of the study was to measure the frequency of disease awareness campaigns in Latvian media and assess their compliance with international and European guidelines.

Materials that mentioned conditions or symptoms or manufacturers and provided treatment suggestions were selected from high-circulation media: 12 newspapers, magazines and six online portals. In total 263 materials from print (n = 149) and online media (n = 114) were collected between April and September 2015 in the Latvian and Russian languages. 94 out of the 263 items were news and other 169 were disease-awareness advertisements. The latter were assessed by three researchers after excluding duplicates (n = 157) using a previously developed instrument based on the WHO Ethical Criteria for Medicinal Drug Promotion and on the Dutch self-regulation guidelines which are consistent with the EU and Latvian regulations.

**Results.** The most common conditions advertised were cardiovascular diseases (10.7%), dermatological problems (8.3%), cancer (7.7%), urological problems (7.7%), and pain (7.1%). Of the 157 diseases awareness campaigns assessed, 149 (94.9%) were non-compliant with guidelines. Inter-rater agreement for independent coding of compliance ratings was excellent: 0.906 (95% CI 0.877; 0.929). Non-compliance to the guidelines was most often due to the absence of the author or the source, lack of balance, or use of misleading or incomplete information. Several campaigns specifically promoted prescription brand products. Strikingly, 14% of the disease awareness campaigns in Latvia were sponsored by private clinics.

**Conclusion.** The non-compliance of disease awareness campaigns in Latvia with international and European guidelines is high, and it raises concerns about potential overdiagnosis, as well as warrant the need to expand current pharmaceutical promotion regulations in order to address and monitor disease awareness campaigns and their likely effects.