A Survey of Patient Sources of Prescription Drug Information

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Abstract: A national telephone survey of 1,104 adults who had recently obtained a new prescription was undertaken to determine the nature and amount of drug information obtained. Sixty percent stated that physicians provided directions for use information with the pharmacy reported as about half as active. Only 3 to 6 per cent said they asked the physician or pharmacist for information. However, one in six respondents said they looked up the prescription in a drug reference book such as the Physicians Desk Reference. (Am J Public Health 1984; 74:1161–1162.)

For ambulatory patients, the flow of drug information is traditionally viewed as stemming from the physician and the pharmacist. The purpose of the present study was to provide an overview of the nature, amount, and source of prescription drug information obtained by patients.

Method

Subjects were 1,104 adults (18 years or older) in the continental United States who had obtained a new (non-refill) prescription for themselves or a household member in the previous four weeks. A three-stage sampling technique using random digit dialing was used. The response rate, based on the estimated number of eligible respondents, was 61 per cent. About 61 per cent of the respondents had obtained new prescriptions for themselves in the previous four weeks (n = 673) with the remaining subjects obtaining prescriptions for family members.

Results and Discussion

Two-thirds (66 per cent) of the subjects were female and the mean age of respondents was 41.6 years. Most subjects (80 per cent) had graduated from high school, 21 per cent had graduated from college, and 7 per cent had at least some post-college graduate work. The median income was between $15,000 and $25,000. Thus, the sample was somewhat younger and more highly educated than the general population of drug users.

Most respondents (61 per cent) said they purchased one drug the last time they obtained a new prescription. One-third (34 per cent) said they obtained their most recent prescription within the last week. Before asking any questions about the information received, subjects were asked to think only about the new (non-refill) prescription(s) they had obtained most recently at the pharmacy.

Experience at the Pharmacy

Most respondents (58 per cent) said the medication was handed to them by the pharmacist. The remaining subjects said the medication was handed to them by a clerk or cashier (37 per cent) or delivered (5 per cent). To obtain data on oral

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TABLE 1—Information Provided at Pharmacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Respondent Told n (%)</th>
<th>Respondent Asked n (%)</th>
<th>Respondent Not Told n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How much of the medicine to take</td>
<td>236 (23)</td>
<td>24 (2)</td>
<td>771 (70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often to take</td>
<td>242 (23)</td>
<td>32 (3)</td>
<td>785 (74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refills</td>
<td>127 (12)</td>
<td>35 (3)</td>
<td>864 (84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precautions</td>
<td>133 (13)</td>
<td>33 (3)</td>
<td>872 (84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Side effects</td>
<td>78 (8)</td>
<td>34 (3)</td>
<td>924 (89)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The patient’s condition and age strongly influenced the type of information provided. Overall, those receiving prescriptions for chronic conditions were about twice as likely to report being informed about refills, precautions and side effects than users of other types of medicines. About three-fourths of those age 21 to 40 were spontaneously given directions about how to use drugs, whereas slightly over half (55 per cent) of those over age 41 were spontaneously given directions for use.

TABLE 2—Information Provided at Physician’s Office

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Respondent Told n (%)</th>
<th>Respondent Asked n (%)</th>
<th>Respondent Not Told n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How much of the medicine to take</td>
<td>496 (50)</td>
<td>27 (3)</td>
<td>368 (41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often to take</td>
<td>517 (58)</td>
<td>27 (3)</td>
<td>349 (39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refills</td>
<td>257 (29)</td>
<td>20 (2)</td>
<td>603 (69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precautions</td>
<td>233 (26)</td>
<td>35 (4)</td>
<td>619 (70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Side effects</td>
<td>202 (23)</td>
<td>32 (4)</td>
<td>652 (74)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only 5 per cent said they were given any written information about the medicine. Instruction sheets were the most popular form, followed by brochures and pamphlets. About one-fourth of those receiving written information said they obtained multiple forms. The few physicians who distributed written materials may have adopted this as a general educational strategy and distribute several forms. In addition to brochures or leaflets, 24 respondents said they received information from a reference book. Audiovisual information—such as computer terminals, audio or visual tapes—were rarely provided (n = 14).

Self-Motivated Information Seeking

The subsample queried about both physician and pharmacist counseling activities was asked about other sources of drug information (n = 898). About 16 per cent said they looked up their most recent prescription in a drug reference book. The Physician’s Desk Reference was the most frequently consulted reference book, used by 7 per cent of the subjects. Encyclopedias were used by 1 per cent and a wide variety of other books were mentioned. Use of a reference book was more frequent for younger respondents, and those with higher education and greater income. About 6 per cent said they consulted magazines (especially women’s and news magazines) about their most recent prescription. About 18 per cent said they spoke to friends, relatives, or neighbors about their most recent prescription.

One tenet necessary for interpreting this survey is that the results are based upon the perceptions and memory of patients. Nevertheless, our behavior is often influenced by what we believe, rather than by objective reality.

Acknowledgments

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- Population Genetics
- Prenatal/Perinatal Genetics
- Somatic Cell Genetics

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