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HOW FAMILY DOCTORS CAN BE MISLED BY DRUG COMPANIES: AN EXAMPLE CONCERNING ANTIBIOTIC THERAPY FOR UPPER RESPIRATORY TRACT INFECTIONS



In June 2005 Italian family doctors received by mail a booklet titled "USE THE BEST FIRST" containing a "revolutionary" message.

The booklet reports the conclusions of a workshop, organized by Bayer (the company's name is never quoted) and held at the Istituto Superiore di Sanità, in Rome, about the necessity of radically changing the way of treating Upper Respiratory Tract Infections (URTI).



The booklet states that it is necessary to use a powerful and wide spectrum antibiotic like moxafloxacin, at the very beginning to treat pharyngitis, tonsillitis, otitis and rhinosinusitis effectively and in order to avoid the onset and the spreading of antimicrobial resistance.

On the contrary, literature does not support these theses neither concerning the appropriateness of the therapy, nor the decrease of antimicrobial resistance.

In particular, the aim of the chapter "ORL infection to be treated without uncertainty" is to widen the use of moxifloxacin from labelled indications (sinusitis

only) to any upper respiratory tract infections. This use, off label and not approved by the AIFA (Italian Drug Agency), would obviously increase the drug sales.

Three communication techniques are used to achieve the goal: data manipulation, recourse to a third party

and the use of a trademark. The contents of the booklet are not completely false but set out so that there is a mixture of correct

information, over-alarming statements (1), misleading references to tables in the text (2), deliberately truncated quotations (i.e. the quoted Guide lines concern Sinusitis only and not all the URTI) (3) and evocative and allusive words (4).

This results in distorting the picture.

To make the statements more credible and reliable, they have been quoted by 40 specialists and by some important people unknown to them like Paul Erlich (5) (deceased in 1915) or institutions like the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (6) (third party technique). Finally, the logotype USE THE BEST FIRST (7) has been invented. This iconic element strengthens the verbal aspect in favour of a long lasting memorization of the

This booklet is not a scientific instrument but a misleading promotion which attempts to interfere with the doctors' independent and appropriate therapeutic choice. And, if the choice is not aimed at the patients' best interest, marketing comes before science.



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