Attitudes of private medical practitioners towards package inserts and other drug information sources

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Methods

A simple 1-page questionnaire which asked three groups of questions was designed. The first group was concerned with basic information about the doctor (type of practice, year of qualification, university where degree was obtained, age and sex). The second group of questions concerned currently available package inserts (usefulness, frequency of use, reasons for use). The third group of questions related to other information systems (use of the *Monthly Index of Medical Specialities* (MIMS) and the MIMS desk reference, and the nature of possible additional information sources).

Medical representatives of a pharmaceutical company distributed 1000 questionnaires to practitioners. Results were subjected to a one-way frequency analysis utilizing an HP 9845B computer.

Results

A total of 221 questionnaires was returned. Table I gives demographic data relating to the respondents. When their opinion was asked about the package insert, 72% of the respondents found it useful or extremely useful (Fig. 1). It also seemed that the package insert was consulted rather frequently judging by the last time the respondent had consulted such a document (Fig. 2). A similar picture was obtained when respondents were asked about the frequency of use: daily - 9%, weekly - 49%, monthly - 24%, a few times a year - 17% and less than once a year - 1%.

The reasons for consulting the package insert are shown in Table II. The respondents' use of two commercial sources of information on drugs was also investigated. The South African Medicines Control Council puts a great deal of time and effort into the content and standard of the package insert. It is a legal requirement that this document accompany each package unit of drugs produced, and it forms the basis for claims allowed in drug promotion. In an editorial Modell called package inserts 'stuffers' because 'stuffing packages seems to be the only use to which they were certain to be put'. With this in mind, a study was undertaken to ascertain the attitude of a consumer group — the doctor in private practice — towards package inserts currently available in South Africa. The basic question was whether this document, which occupies an important legal position, is or is not useful in clinical practice. As far as could be ascertained, no previous studies have been carried out on this subject in South Africa.

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### TABLE II. REASONS FOR CONSULTING PACKAGE INSERT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for use</th>
<th>Never (%)</th>
<th>Occasionally (%)</th>
<th>Usually (%)</th>
<th>Frequently (%)</th>
<th>No answer (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For information about:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dose</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanism of action</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indications</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Side-effects</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1. Response to the question ‘What do you think of the current package insert?’

Fig. 2. Response to the question ‘When did you last consult a package insert?’

Information is shown in Fig. 3. When asked about additional information on drugs, 32% of the respondents preferred a loose-leaf file which could be updated and 67% a regular comprehensive book (1% failed to reply); 69% of respondents were prepared to pay for such a system.

### Discussion

From the data obtained it seems that a negative view of the package insert is unwarranted as far as private medical practitioners are concerned. In general there appears to be a real need for information on drugs, and the package insert, MIMS and the MIMS desk reference are used frequently. Judging from the reasons given for consulting the package insert, information regarding side-effects and dosage appears to be what is most often required.

Based on these findings, we are of the opinion that there is a need for an additional source of drug information in the form of a comprehensive book published at regular intervals. On the one hand the package insert and MIMS desk reference are relatively cold, unpalatable scientific documents, whereas promotional publications contain information supplied by the manufacturer who understandably puts his product in the best possible light. We believe that something is needed to fill the gap between these two poles. Fears from the drug-regulatory side or from industry that this may be a costly affair could be a real objection, but as far as the doctors surveyed are concerned the vast majority would be prepared to bear some or all of the costs of such an information source. Is it not perhaps time for private enterprise and Government to get together and take the initiative?

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### Reference