

PUBLIC EDUCATION

Don't take drugs lightly, French consumers warned

REMARKABLE progress has been made in recent decades in drug efficacy state the organizers of a new French campaign to improve the use of medicines by consumers. But:

The French are heavy consumers of drugs

Recent research shows that the French consume twice as many drugs as the Germans and three times as many as the Americans. Each French person buys an average of 50 packs of drugs a year, indicating a pattern of overconsumption, which in 1986 led to 17,200 hospital admissions due to pharmaceutical poisoning. According to a 1990 survey by the Société française d'Education pour la

as others, such as antibiotics, may be regarded as "dangerous", leading to patients halting their treatment too early.

Such beliefs, state the campaign organizers, lead to irrational behaviour such as: increasing the dose to make the treatment "more effective"; making a personal "selection" of items on a prescription; indiscriminate use of items in the family medicine cupboard; taking a drug that was prescribed for a different purpose; passing on the drug to someone else; mixing treatments; and taking a second drug to offset the effects of the first (e.g. a stimulant after a soporific).

Using drugs in this way - because they are taken too much for granted - reduces or even destroys their therapeutic efficacy and leads to adverse effects ranging from minor functional disorders (skin rashes, digestive and liver complaints, behavioural disorders) to major cardiac disorders.

Campaign for better drug use

In order to promote more knowledgeable and discriminating consumer attitudes and behaviour a major public education campaign has been jointly launched by France's Ministry of Social Affairs and Solidarity, the National Health Insurance Fund and the French Committee for Health Education.

The campaign, targeted at all consumers, is aimed at making people aware of the realities of drugs: that every drug contains active substances which can become dangerous; that these substances, in scientifically calculated amounts, are what make it effective, but that if the drug is wrongly used they produce adverse effects on

health. The goal is to put the therapeutic role of drugs into a broader perspective, which includes advice, healthy living and good communication between patient and prescriber.

Disseminating the message

The central message of the campaign "A drug is not something to be taken lightly" is being diffused through a variety of media, including a 30 second television spot, direct information to all doctors and pharmacists, and inserts in professional journals. Health professionals who wish to pass on the campaign mes-



English translation: Darling, it's your new drug cabinet..



Poster from the French public education campaign on drug use: don't take drugs lightly.

Santé the French underestimate their own drug use. 81% claim to take drugs only when they are really ill, while 8% say they take them as soon as they have a problem.

Taking drugs seems to have become a reflex

French people have access, over the counter or on prescription, to a wide array of drugs to combat illness, but drug-taking is often based on incorrect beliefs. Some drugs, notably analgesics, are regarded as "harmless" when in fact at high doses they can be very toxic; where-

sage to their patients and clients will have a number of information materials at their disposal such as:

- a small poster (see illustration) for the waiting room of private or hospital practitioners and a small poster for pharmacies; these posters advise patients on the rational use of drugs and urge them to engage in dialogue with their doctor and pharmacist;
- a leaflet containing general information on the use of drugs available to patients from doctors and pharmacies.

Using local networks

Decentralizing the campaign is a key approach to bringing about far-reaching

and lasting changes in each individual's behaviour with drugs. The networks of each of the three campaign organizers are being called upon to pass on and boost the campaign message at the local level. Steering committees at regional and département levels are responsible for organizing and implementing information and awareness activities directed at local target groups such as health professionals, press clubs, companies, secondary schools and universities.

Media response

The French media, while welcoming the campaign, has pointed out that the problem extends beyond the misuse of drugs by the general public. 'Le Monde' observed that the campaign was directed primarily at consumers and not at the prescribers - pharmacists, physicians and others. It commented: "Yet these people are just as much involved in the phenomenon of over-consumption; for instance, the number of products written on the average prescription is on average much higher than in other countries... Without doubt this is one of the major causes of the high consumption of drugs; that is why doctors ought to learn - or be re-taught - not to prescribe a drug systematically the moment a patient appears with a complaint. Very often what patients come for when they go to the doctor is to be relieved of some fear. In other words, what is needed is a dialogue rather than a technical response based on drug prescription." ■

Text of the spot

"There are many drugs of many kinds, they are all made for looking after your health. They all contain active substances to make the body react. They have to be taken in the right quantities, and there are combinations that must be avoided. Your doctor and your pharmacist know about drugs. Ask them for details and follow closely the treatment prescribed by your doctor. A drug is not something to be taken lightly."