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AMA wants no drug ads that aim at consumers

Written by: Zachary Tracer, November 17, 2015

Drug companies should stop advertising directly to consumers, the American Medical Association said on Tuesday, declaring that the ads often push patients to more-expensive treatments and inflate demand for therapies.

In a vote on Tuesday at the group's annual meeting in Atlanta, the AMA called for an end to television commercials and magazine spreads that are used to pitch prescription drugs. It's a change from the group's previous position, which said the ads were fine as long as they were educational and accurate. The U.S. is one of the few countries that allows direct-to-consumer drug ads.

The Ohio State Medical Association supports the call for a ban, said spokesman Reginald Fields.

Ohio doctors are fielding more patient questions about highly advertised drugs, Fields said. "More and more, patients are insisting they want to try a particular drug because it's been advertised to them."

Proponents of drug and device advertising might argue for the free flow of information, but Dr. Harrison G. Weed said the companies' advertising often relies on emotional appeals and false hope to increase revenue.

The timing of Tuesday's vote eventually could make the topic debate fodder among candidates vying to become president, said Weed, chairman of the pharmacy and therapeutics executive committee at Ohio State University's Wexner Medical Center.

"I like patients to share their ideas with me; we can come up with better care," Weed said. But, he added, "When people come in with false impressions, I need to spend more time educating them. It takes time, which is at a premium."

Doctors often aren't reimbursed for taking the time to educate patients about the benefits or drawbacks of a drug, and some doctors likely relent if a patient pushes hard enough, said Cathy Levine, executive director of the consumer-advocacy organization Universal Health Care Action Network of Ohio.

"That is not in the patient's best interest," Levine said. "Pharmaceutical advertising interferes with that trust between physicians and patients."

Dispatch Reporter Ben Sutherly contributed to this story.