

Ethical issues in advertising and promotion of medical units

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Abstract

Bioethics tries to define the medical activity and any other related activity needed to maintain the function of a health institution, through the development of principles and moral values. Bioethics is quite broad and has a background that combines various disciplines such as medicine, philosophy, law, sociology, and theology. Advertising and promotion are part of the strategy aimed at developing and maintaining relationships with the targeted audience (patients). To regulate this activity, it was necessary to develop ethical rules of healthcare marketing. The content of promotional messages must be truthful and should not create unjustified expectations. The doctor or the healthcare unit must be able to provide the services claimed in the advertisement. From an ethical point of view, marketing communication should be more consistent with reality, even if its purpose is to shed light on more attractive issues. In this context, the categories and groups vulnerable to certain content of the advertising message should be mentioned. A patient with a serious suffering will be easily influenced and will tend to trust any promise easily, with the desire to heal. Ethically, the information presented must not alter the reality and should not give false hopes to patients.

Those responsible for marketing in the healthcare field must keep in mind the ethics code of the medical profession, must maintain an honest marketing communication, which does not create inaccurate expectations, must not denigrate other colleagues, and must use a message whose content should respect the dignity of the profession.

Keywords: medical ethics, advertising, promotional message, healthcare

Medical ethics (bioethics) studies those issues of controversy arising due to the new possibilities brought by the continuous progress in biology and medicine. Also, bioethics tries to define the medical activity and any other related activity needed in order to maintain the function of a health institution, through the development of principles and moral values. Bioethics is quite broad and has a background that combines

various disciplines such as medicine, philosophy, law, sociology, and theology. Internationally there are many institutions, committees, and courts charged with identifying ethical principles to underpin the activity in the medical field, principles, which take into account values such as human dignity, right to life or autonomy [1].

The evolution of medical activity performance forms has inevitably led to the

emergence of competitive competition, which in turn led to the emergence of healthcare marketing. Thus, a health institution requires the application of various marketing strategies in order to maintain itself on the market field. Advertising and promotion are part of the strategy aimed at developing and maintaining relationships with the targeted audience (patients). To regulate this activity, it was necessary to develop ethical rules of healthcare marketing [1].

One of the most frequent discussions that arose with the development of healthcare marketing was due to the concern that advertising will lead to a situation in which the medical activity will turn into an overly commercial one. Of course, this is quite difficult to avoid, considering that the medical units providing services and healthcare have the right to make their own activities known and inform consumers on the health services they provide. In the past, it was considered that advertising and promotion were below the dignity of the medical profession and that the only way to gain new patients was by recommendation from satisfied patients and other clinicians' positive assessments. Such thinking is no longer compatible with the current patients' requirements, which want to be more and more informed [2].

Today, it is considered ethical for health institutions or individual clinicians to promote their work as long as the information is truthful, honest, non-discriminatory, and not misleading. The biggest challenge is often represented by the message sent, which is not sufficiently detailed because of the selected multimedia format. In advertising purpose, various media can be used, such as newspapers, Internet, billboards, brochures, audio-visual means, etc. In any case, it must be kept in mind that ethics requires that any paid advertisement should be identified as such [3].

A special attention should also be paid to the used language. The available advertising space is often limited. This leads to the need of shortening and compressing the message and it can lead to an extremely different version of the original message, thus, advertising misleading by providing information that is different from that intended [3].

Vouchers offering various services at reduced prices or even given for free are included in the category of marketing strategies designed to promote healthcare units, in order to attract patients and retain them. Based on this, an ethics dispute raised because it was possible that this practice undermined the medical component of the unit favoring the commercial aspect. Also, in such cases, the quality of services at a lower price should not be inferior to those offered at the initial price. In the same context of commercial appearance of the medical activity, the public perception of the medical profession should also be mentioned. This perception can easily be negatively influenced by unethical marketing strategies. Doctors and healthcare units have an important duty of practicing marketing with responsibility [4].

The content of promotional messages must be truthful and should not create unjustified expectations. The doctor or the healthcare unit must be able to provide the services claimed in the advertisement. A special attention should be paid to experimental procedures that have not yet proved the desired results in order not to misinform the patients [5].

From an ethical point of view, marketing communication should be more consistent with reality, even if its purpose is to shed light on more attractive issues. In this context, the categories and groups vulnerable to certain content of the advertising message should be mentioned. A patient with a serious suffering will be easily influenced and will tend to trust any promise easily, with the desire to heal. Ethically, the information presented must not alter the reality and should not give false hopes to patients. Also, promotion by mentioning the success rates is considered unethical in general because, most often, these results are not representative when the selection/ exclusion criteria of eligible patients are unknown. These criteria could lead to a high success rate only for some selected patients. Prospective patients are easily impressed by such high rates and could form inaccurate expectations [4].

Finally yet importantly, the attitude towards other colleagues should be mentioned. When a doctor or a health organization promotes its competence by denigrating the work of other physicians through marketing

material, the marketing activity becomes unethical [6].

In conclusion, those responsible for marketing in the healthcare field must keep in mind the ethics code of the medical profession, must maintain an honest marketing communication, which does not create inaccurate expectations, must not denigrate other colleagues, and must use a message whose content should respect the dignity of the profession.

Today advertising has become a field with an unprecedented dynamism; therefore, marketers must recognize trends and understand them correctly. The media today uses the audience measurement techniques, which are much more efficient, more interactive and therefore experience a similar condition. Executives empowered with advertising in order to attract the targeted audience should be aware of the new trends, should be ready to apply them, should be malleable, but regardless of established goals, should have an ethical attitude and conduct.

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