

When do Patients Ask their Physician for a Specific Drug?

(Published in the German 'Arzneimittelzeitung' in June 2009)

Colibri Research asked for motives and preferences.



Hamburg, Germany. More than half of all patients ask their physician for the prescription of a specific drug from time to time. The knowledge about the physiological compatibility is the main reason for so doing. But the confidence in the manufacturer also has an impact on patient behaviour.

By Dr. Ute Rademacher (Colibri Research)

When asking physicians about the influence factors of therapy selection and patient profiles, you often come across the concept of the mature and emancipated patient. Most of all general physicians, but also specialists in Germany understand themselves as consultants, explaining their patients the advantages and disadvantages of certain treatment approaches, but leaving the final decision to be made by the patients.

On the other hand, "critical" patients make life difficult for physicians: They are dissatisfied with the medical treatment, often change their physician and terminate therapies without talking with their physician about problems and alternatives in advance. But how much is the self-image of physician and patient as equal partners already reflected in the actual prescription patterns? When do patients explicitly ask their physicians for a specific drug?

The agency Colibri Research conducted a quantitative online study supported by Toluna in May 2009. 2000 German men and women indicated in which cases they ask their physician for the prescription of a specific pharmaceutical. The results show that the majority of the sample (53,1 %) demands a specific drug when talking to their doctor under certain circumstances. The core motivation lies – a comparable efficacy provided - in the better physiological compatibility of the desired drug. The confidence in the manufacturer is important for 10,1% of male and 7,7% of female respondents – showing a higher impact than personal recommendations by friends or positive resonance in the internet or other media. The competence ascribed to the manufacturer can apparently motivate the request of a specific product. In the group of younger patients (16-34 years), the image of the manufacturer plays a more important role (average 9,2%) when compared to middle-aged patients (35-54 years: 8,2 %) or elderly patients (55 plus: 6,5 %) in tendency.

Implications for the pharmaceutical communication

The saving of costs is not only relevant for physicians, but also patients: 12,7 percent of men and 8,4 percent of women rated this criteria as important to them. Not surprisingly, differences occurred depending on the personal annual income.

But what are the implications for manufacturers of pharmaceutical products? The study provides reasons to believe that patients are an interesting target group for manufacturers - not only of OTC but also ethical drugs. If patients believe in a specific benefit for their own physical wellbeing they express wishes and preferences in the patient-physician interaction. Accordingly, it is important for pharmaceutical manufacturers to support doctors in their role as consultant: Not only functional information about the mechanism of action is relevant for so doing. But, physicians also need information about noticeable advantages for the patient.

Products have to convey messages that capture patients' needs and worries (such as the fear of side effects). They should use a language and visuals that patients understand and connect with. The umbrella brand image of manufacturers can serve as influential competence donor when being filled by relevant values and positive emotions - not merely for physicians and pharmacists, but also for their patients.