

Prescription Drugs: Myths and Facts

March 2010

On February 23, in a presentation entitled “Prescription Drugs: Myths and Facts” Dr. Peter McLeod, Professor of Medicine and Pharmacology at McGill, gave the Laurentian Club audience a talking-to about drugs, doctors, the media and, especially, the pharmaceutical companies.

Accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation to underline what he was saying, Dr. McLeod began with the statement that, as a society, we have blind faith in prescription drugs and don't ask enough questions. The biggest problem we face in our health care is over-medication, mostly as a result of aggressive marketing by the drug companies. As an example, he pointed to Denmark and Holland, where, despite similar standards of living and of health, doctors write only half the number of prescriptions that doctors write in Canada. He also expressed concern that many of these drugs are useless or even downright harmful.

He also alerted us to the cost of drugs, with the annual per capita figure running at \$737 in 2008, but, he added, when you look only at the population over 65, this grows to \$1,778 each. In many cases this is the result of what Dr. McLeod referred to as the “marketing of fear,” selling preventive drugs that have no proven benefit. These drugs, identified by drug companies for the treatment of conditions with scary-sounding names, have on occasion been proven ineffective and even harmful in independent tests. Simple, normal emotional and physical states have been medicalized and turned into conditions needing treatment. Expensive drug “therapies” are prescribed because the drug companies aggressively influence doctors. He quoted figures that show these companies spend \$8,000 per doctor per year promoting their products in the US. Figures for Canada are hard to find. Dr. McLeod reminded his listeners that the drug companies are doing a great job for their shareholders, where profit is the motive.

He also underlined that there are risks associated with most drugs, and that approximately 100,000 deaths occur each year in the United States as a result of prescription drugs. We can only assume that those numbers are proportional here in Canada.

Dr. McLeod offered some positive things about drugs. For example, acetaminophen is a really good choice for pain relief, and the generic brands are as effective as the name brands. In response to a question about liver-related damage from overdosing on acetaminophen, he said that it is very difficult to overdose and such concerns can be partly attributed to the aggressive marketing of more expensive alternatives to acetaminophen. For high blood pressure, the most effective treatment is simple diuretics that cost approximately 5¢ each, versus the \$1.50 for the highly-touted medications usually prescribed.

His bottom line: We must each assume responsibility for the drugs we take. Ask questions, do research, find out about risk/benefit analysis, ask if you can get by with a lower dose, or without the drugs altogether. Consult your pharmacist who often has more knowledge of drugs and their interactions, as well as more time than most doctors to discuss them with you.

Dr. McLeod challenged the audience to think, and he did so with good humour and a genuine concern for everyone's well-being.

Sheila Eskenazi, President, English Communities Committee of the CSSS des Sommets