INFORMATION, KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER AND LEARNING: 
THE CASE OF DIRECT-TO-CONSUMER DRUG ADVERTISING

Summary

There is little doubt that the concept of knowledge has reached a dominant position in many facets of society. Drucker (1993) goes so far as to suggest that knowledge is becoming the basic economic resource. The Internet, advances in information technology, and models of e-business are rapidly expanding access to knowledge, both within organizations and beyond to consumers. In health care, we have seen evidence of this increased access to knowledge in the proliferation of hospital intranets as well as Web sites dedicated to providing consumers with information on medical conditions, prescription drugs, and health care providers. It is estimated that in 1998 more than 60 million Americans searched the Internet for health related information (Neff, 1999 as cited in Maddox, 1999).

It is the objective of this research to draw on the consumer behaviour, cognitive psychology, and marketing literatures while integrating research on knowledge utilization and clinical decision-making to develop a framework for understanding how consumers process health-related information, convert it to knowledge, make inferences about their own health status, and ultimately interact with their caregiver. The context for this research is direct-to-consumer advertising by pharmaceutical companies in North America. This research will focus on the presentation of information, the reasoning processes employed by consumers, and potential biases in assessing risk. Direct-to-consumer advertising and communication was chosen as the context for this research partly due to the wealth of research on how consumers respond to advertising, the wide reach of television to the vast majority of consumers, as well as the existing debate surrounding the benefits and costs associated with this type of communication.

By understanding how consumers of health care services process knowledge, health care professionals may be better equipped to handle patient requests and challenges, achieve higher compliance with prescription medication, better cope with the changing nature of the patient-physician relationship, and ultimately improve health care delivery and consumer outcomes. Understanding the processes involved in consumers’ learning about these treatments may also be of interest to public policy makers around the world, especially in terms of regulating consumer exposure to health care advertisements and other forms of marketing communication. Managers also need to be aware of how consumers are utilizing the information contained within their product communication to minimize inappropriate comparisons and inferences and maximize positive product awareness and use.