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Background

Advertising affects consumer and prescriber behaviors. The relationship between pharmaceutical advertising and journals' publication of articles regarding dietary supplements (DS) is unknown.

Methods

We reviewed one year of the issues of 11 major medical journals for advertising and content about DS. Advertising was categorized as pharmaceutical versus other. Articles about DS were included if they discussed vitamins, minerals, herbs or similar products. Articles were classified as major (e.g., clinical trials, cohort studies, editorials and reviews) or other (e.g., case reports, letters, news, and others). Articles' conclusions regarding safety and effectiveness were coded as negative (unsafe or ineffective) or other (safe, effective, unstated, unclear or mixed).

Results

Journals' total pages per issue ranged from 56 to 217 while advertising pages ranged from 4 to 88; pharmaceutical advertisements (pharmads) accounted for 1.5% to 76% of ad pages. Journals with the most pharmads published significantly fewer major articles about DS per issue than journals with the fewest pharmads ($P < 0.01$). Journals with the most pharmads published no clinical trials or cohort studies about DS. The percentage of major articles concluding that DS were unsafe was 4% in journals with fewest and 67% among those with the most pharmads ($P = 0.02$). The percentage of articles concluding that DS were ineffective was 50% higher among journals with more than among those with fewer pharmads ($P = 0.4$).

Conclusion

These data are consistent with the hypothesis that increased pharmaceutical advertising is associated with publishing fewer articles about DS and publishing more articles with conclusions that DS are unsafe. Additional research is needed to test alternative hypotheses for these findings in a larger sample of more diverse journals.