



Companies seek patients for products

Medical device makers tailor ads to consumers

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Need a new knee or an operation to relieve excruciating back pain?

Now, more than ever, chances are you'll ask for the hardware to be used during your surgery by name.

At least that's the hope of medical device companies, which increasingly are shifting some marketing efforts from doctors directly to consumers.

They're recruiting high profile patients such as Olympic gymnastics champion Mary Lou Retton and professional golfer Jack Nicklaus to promote the attributes of their joint replacement systems in slick television, radio, magazine and newspaper ads.

Even a growing local company, Akron-based Theken Disc, will soon be launching a direct-to-consumer advertising campaign to recruit patients for its new spine disc replacement product the Theken eDisc.

"Patients are savvier," said Rachael Smith, marketing director for Theken (pronounced Tay-ken). "They want to know what's going into their body."

Supporters say ads can raise public awareness and prompt conversation between doctors and patients.

Dr. Robert Kepley, an orthopedic surgeon in the Crystal Clinics Cuyahoga Falls office, routinely sees patients who have researched joint replacements after viewing product ads.

"It's a big help to us," said Kepley, who also serves pm the staff in Summa Health System's adult reconstruction services. "It brings patients with problems to our attention. Even though they might eventually come in, it gets them to us sooner. It's a well-known fact that the sooner I can fix a joint, the better the outcome is going to be for the patients."

Some Doctors Concerned

Some doctors are critical of this direct-to-consumer marketing trend. They raise serious concerns about the appropriateness of pushing technical, highly specialized medical products directly to the general public.

A study released at the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons' annual meeting in February found that 77 percent of surgeons had concerns about patients being confused or misinformed by ads.

Direct-to-consumer ads for orthopedic devices “may not inform patients about differences in product design, composition of materials, and strength of devices,” the group warns in its position statement. “...When surgeons choose devices tailored to an individual patient’s needs, wear of an orthopaedic implants is a significant consideration, but consumers may not be aware of such issues.”

Dr. Tim Stover, Akron General Medical Center’s medical director of health and wellness, put it this way: “The question is, are we giving them just enough information to be dangerous?”

Until about five years ago, medical companies that sell orthopedic devices directed all their marketing efforts to doctors and hospitals, which still ultimately make the decision about which product to use.

The strategy started to change in 2003, when New Jersey-based Stryker Orthopaedics launched a television and print advertising campaign featuring Jack Nicklaus, a patient, to promote its ceramic-on-ceramic Trident hip.

Ads by Stryker and its competitors direct patients to Websites and toll-free numbers where they can request information and find doctors in their area who use the products.

Yin Becker, the company’s vice president of health care innovations, said because doctors, not patient, decide which product is best for each situation, most Stryker’s marketing and education is geared toward surgeons. (She declined to say how much the company spends on direct-to-consumer marketing.)

With direct-to-consumer ads, Becker said, “our goal was to raise awareness so the patients could identify and go to an orthopedist in their local area.”

Companies need caution

Stephen Levin, executive editor of In Vivo, a monthly trade publication, said companies that advertise orthopedic devices directly to patients “have to be very, very careful that they’ve seeded the ground properly.

“Direct-to-consumer advertising for medical device companies is a double-edged sword,” he said. “If doctors aren’t ready to embrace your product, the worst thing you can do is send a horde of patients to doctors’ offices for a particular product that the doctors aren’t ready to use.”

Replacing bad knee and hip joints in big business - and it’s expected to get bigger.

Nearly 700,000 U.S. patients undergo total hip or knee replacement annually, according to the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons. As the baby boomers age and the U.S. population continues to gain weight, more procedures are expected to take place in coming years.

To grab a bigger share of the expanding market, Indiana-based Biomet Orthopaedics Inc. recently ran a TV and print advertising campaign in Northeast Ohio.

The ads featured Retton, an Olympic gold medallist (and patient) promoting Biomet’s M2-a-Magnum hip replacement system.

The company is running the spots in selected markets nationwide to help educate patients, said Stacey Jones, Biomet’s manager of consumer marketing.

“It’s a good thing for the industry as a whole to raise awareness about treatment options,” she said.

Smith, of Akron-based Theken, said if done properly, direct-to-consumer campaigns also can help small companies boost their name recognition and generate interest among surgeons.

Theken plans to run an advertising campaign in select markets where it has relationships with doctors to recruit 200 patients for its new eDisc, which will be used to replace ruptured discs between vertebrae. The eDisc combines polymers with microelectronic technology that can provide doctors with post-operative information to track how well the patient is doing.

“For new devices, it’s really generating awareness,” Smith said. “You’re educating the public that there is this technology available.”

Physician’s Choice

Kepley, the Cuyahoga Falls orthopedic physician, said none of his patients has complained when he prefers another product over the one they saw in an ad.

“It just requires a little bit of time and education for the patient for them to understand these are all good implants and I happened to have chosen this implant,” he said. “All of these implants have great results. All I want them to do is trust me in the final selection of which implant is best for them.”

Kepley said surgeons typically don’t switch from product to product just to meet a patient demand - and with good reason.

“It takes a while to get really good with a new system,” he said. “So if you are using a new system every week just because a patient asks for it, you’re probably not going to be as precise and accurate as you would be if you used the same system every day, day after day.”

Patients who need joint replacements probably should be asking their surgeons how many similar procedures they’ve preformed - not which product they use, Kepley said.