

# Generalists and psychiatrists selecting antidepressants

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## Abstract

### Introduction

Antidepressants are drugs that the pharmaceutical industry widely markets to physicians. Medical representative visits (MRVs) and opinion leaders (OLs) are two main sources of information that can guide prescribing habits. We investigated the situation among French-speaking Swiss physicians.

### Method

We conducted a qualitative content analysis of 34 semi-structured interviews with generalists, psychiatrists, experts in psychopharmacology (OLs) and medical sales representatives, complemented by direct observations.

### Results

MRVs are seldom used by generalists, and are seen as a waste of time. They impose messages that are not considered credible or useful. Psychiatrists are more satisfied by MRVs: the messages are more consistent with their practice. The interactions of medical sales representatives with generalists and psychiatrists are different. Our OLs are local OLs with academic roles, formal or informal, expert and peer, not appointed by the pharmaceutical industry. They are charismatic, known and recognized as skilled, and they enable physicians who consult them to shape their prescribing behavior with intellectual independence. Both generalists and psychiatrists judged the OLs as useful, competent and accredited for CME.

### Conclusions

French-speaking Swiss physicians use OLs as a preferred antidepressant prescribing tool. We understand why the pharmaceutical industry is interested in using OLs as marketing tools.

## Introduction

### Background

Antidepressants were chosen as an example of products that pharmaceutical industry markets to prescribing physicians.

In Switzerland, according to OFS (Office Fédéral de la Statistique), 4% of the population of 15 years and over consume antidepressants daily or several times a week (OFS, 2012). These data represent also the prescribing trend of physicians regarding antidepressants. Among the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries, a mean of 5.6 DDD (Defined Daily Dose) per cent was reported in 2011 (OECD, 2013). In 2014, pharmaceutical industry sold 3.26 million packs of antidepressants giving 151.78 million CHF in return (IMS Health Suisse, 2015).

To get information about drugs, physicians have many available resources such as medical representative visits (MRVs), opinion leaders (OLs) - as they participate more and more to congresses and interventions because of the mandatory continuing medical education (CME) -, written or online medical reviews and guidelines (Burnand, 2015). To promote its drugs, pharmaceutical industry uses MRVs and OLs as main commercial strategies.

The Swiss literature concerning this subject is rare.

### Objective

Our aim was to describe and analyse the situation of MRVs and OLs as tools of information for physicians and as promotional strategies for pharmaceutical industry, in Switzerland.

## Method

We conducted a qualitative content analysis of 34 semi-structured interviews with generalists (n=8), psychiatrists (n=12), experts in psychopharmacology (OLs) (n=4) and medical sales representatives (MRs) (n=10), complemented by direct observation of MRVs (n=8) as well as educational events led by the experts (n=3), in French-speaking Switzerland. The chosen category of drugs was antidepressants.

The Swiss French-speaking physicians community was chosen for it is an homogeneous population comparable with European countries, especially because physicians prescribe but cannot sell drugs directly. We studied MRVs and OLs as they are source of information for physicians **AND** as they are the principal strategies used by pharmaceutical industry to promote drugs such as antidepressants. We ruled on what OLs meant and clarified different roles they can play in the field of health care (international literature review) (Pittet, 2015).

## Results



Nowadays with the high level of stress, anxiety and mood disorders are quite frequent. To treat these disorders, physicians benefit of psychoactive substances such as antidepressants and anxiolytics.

In Switzerland, antidepressants are the major group of drugs prescribed both for anxiety and mood disorders (Ruob Fuchs, 2006), particularly since the introduction of SSRI drugs and as benzodiazepine anxiolytics are considered to be too much addictive. The prescription of antidepressants is often initiated by generalists and sometimes continued and adapted by psychiatrists (Kosel, 2012). Antidepressants represent 49% of the psychotropic drugs prescribed by psychiatrists in private practice and 42% of those prescribed by generalists (OBSAN, 2010).

Better diagnosis (DSM, CIM) and emergence of SSRI (old and new generation) have conducted to enlarge antidepressants prescription which now represent a real important market for pharmaceutical industry. To inform physicians and sell their new antidepressant drugs, pharmaceutical industries use their main strategies: MRVs and OLs.

➤ The Swiss MRV is already a limited way of information for physicians, especially generalists. It is also a declining strategy of promotion of antidepressants and many other drugs for pharmaceutical industry.

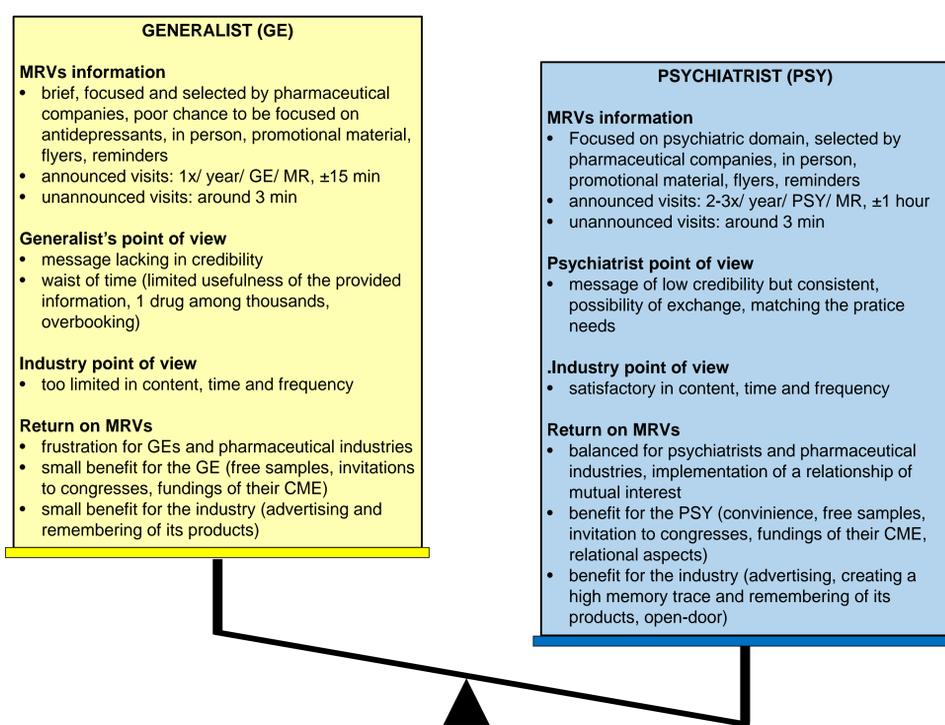


FIG 1. Impact of MRV on physicians - particularly for the Swiss French-speaking community (generalists and psychiatrists) - related to antidepressants

Opinion leadership comes from the theory of two-step flow of communication propounded by E. Katz and P. Lazarfeld (1955). An OL is a charismatic, well-known and recognized as skilled person; the OL is enabled by the community to drive a digest of a subject.

**An OL can play different roles according to circumstances: LOCAL OPINION LEADER (LOL), KEY OPINION LEADER (KOL), FORMAL/INFORMAL OPINION LEADER (FOL/IOL), EXPERT/PEER OPINION LEADER (EOL/POL)**

Our Swiss OLs are 4 psychopharmacologists having academic roles. Most of them were playing local roles (LOLs), one also played a Key role (KOL).

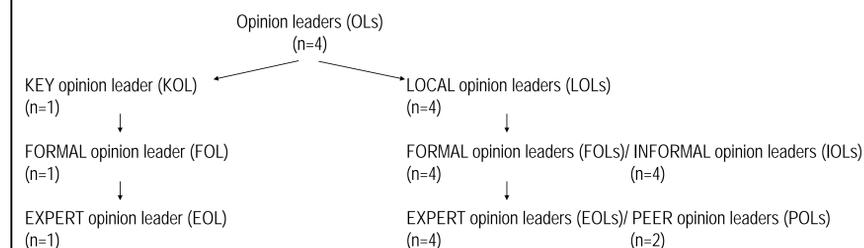


FIG 2. Classification of a sample of experts in psychopharmacology (n=4) according to our role-based typology of OLs

### LOLs ROLES in details

#### LOLs information

appropriate and multi-brand pharmaceutical messages, selected by the physician, in person, during talks 30 min to 1 hour (CME, congresses, symposia, interventions, etc.)

#### Physician point of view

high credibility, appetitive, independent, consistent, possibility of exchange, matching the practice needs, valuable digest

#### Industry point of view

visibility, high frequency, spread

#### Return on LOLs

balanced for physicians and pharmaceutical industries  
benefit for physicians (convenience, appetitive, meeting and exchanging with OLs and peers, credits for CME)  
benefit for Industry (free advertising, credibility and high rate proximity of LOLs with regard to the substantial physician community, interesting and significant population of OLs to be recruited to play episodic KOLs roles)

### KOLs ROLES in details

#### KOLs information

message focused on one product, in person, selected by pharmaceutical industry, during talks 30 min to 1h (CME, congresses, symposia, interventions, etc.)

#### Physicians point of view

scientific credibility but a relative practice impact considering suspicion/ certitude about independency, consistent, possibility of exchange, matching the practice needs, valuable digest

#### Industry point of view

high visibility and credibility

#### Return on KOLs

initially: the paradise for physicians and industry  
currently: doubtful for physicians who identify OLs playing regular KOLs roles and for pharmaceutical industries who recognize the strategy as unveiled

FIG 3. Impact of OLs on physicians - particularly for the Swiss French-speaking community (generalists and psychiatrists) - related to antidepressants

## Conclusions

MRVs rise low benefit for generalists to select antidepressants as prescriptions, a phenomenon also mentioned in other European countries (Bras, 2007). The return on MRVs is also low for pharmaceutical industry, explaining why MRVs is declining regarding generalists. By contrast, MRVs offer some benefits for psychiatrists and will be maintained by these specialists and by pharmaceutical industry.

Boosted by CME, OLs are a growing and spreading way of information about drugs such as antidepressants both for generalists and psychiatrists. KOLs roles originally selected by pharmaceutical industry is no more giving good return principally as physicians are suspicious about their objectivity. The LOL roles are valued today and in the future.

In Switzerland, antidepressants are largely prescribed for anxiety and mood disorders, a consequence of a quick application of the health care authorities recommendations (OFSP/BAG, Swissmedic) that are themselves based on efficient research. To select antidepressants and other drugs physicians benefit directly and indirectly of mandatory CME.