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## Stiff Joints, Greased Palms

The recent flurry over COX-2 inhibitors, arthritis pain medications, shows more than drug safety issues. It also demonstrates that widespread advertising successfully spurs demand. Experts agree that prescription pain relievers are appropriate for those few patients who cannot tolerate over-the-counter products, such as Tylenol.

**The large majority of patients on COX-2 inhibitors could safely take over-the-counter pain relievers. The prescription drug costs \$130 per month; Tylenol costs less than \$15 per month.**

In fact, the FDA went on record saying that “there really doesn’t appear to be a need for COX-2 [inhibitors].” FDA scientist David Graham argued that the heightened risk for heart attacks did not justify the pain relief, especially since other non-prescription drugs achieve the same goal without creating serious heart problems. (Reuters Health Information, February 17)

The popularity of arthritis pain drugs is testament to Madison Avenue magic: advertising works. Advertising seduces us to buy things that we truly do not need, and that do not perform better than cheaper goods. Yet, the glossy print advertisements, catchy television commercials, and public relations armies lure us every time.

Advertising inspires patients to ask their physician for the “purple pill” or “whatever Dorothy Hammill is taking.” (Hammill glided through commercials for Vioxx, which was withdrawn from the market earlier this year.) Less than half of physicians agree to such a request. Nevertheless, each additional dollar spent on drug advertising generated more than four dollars in sales in 2000. (Kaiser Family Foundation) In that same year, prescription drug spending rose to \$103 billion in the United States. (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality)

**The health industry is forever inventing more “health,” including expensive drugs that almost no one needs but everyone wants.**

This is another piece of the puzzle explaining why health care costs keep rising beyond our wildest nightmares. That leaves just one question: who has the cover of the puzzle box?