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Title

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Journal

Dermatology Online Journal, 29(4)

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Publication Date

2023

DOI

10.5070/D329461912

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Peer reviewed

Increased prescriptions of oral minoxidil after a high-profile newspaper article about its benefits for hair loss

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Keywords: advertising, alopecia, education, hair-loss, marketing, media, minoxidil

To the Editor:

There is a mounting body of evidence supporting the safety and efficacy of low dose oral minoxidil (LDOM) for treatment of alopecia. Scholarly publications on the subject have grown rapidly with 123 indexed PubMed citations in the past three years, exceeding the 120 during the three decades preceding 2020. In August 2022, *The New York Times* (NYT) reported on the potential benefits of LDOM for hair loss, which was shared widely on multiple social media platforms and was one of the ten most read NYT articles of the year [1-2]. The article cited an observational study [3], included before and after photos, and quoted dermatologists who recommend LDOM. Physicians at our organization noticed an immediate, widespread increase in patient requests for LDOM. We sought to characterize the impact on consumer demand and prescription behavior from high-profile journalism, for an inexpensive generic drug for which there was no other marketing effort.

Kaiser Permanente Northern California (KPNC) provides comprehensive, integrated care to 4.4 million persons. Data were gathered from 94 KPNC outpatient pharmacies in Northern California, showing all new-start oral minoxidil prescriptions given for hair-related diagnoses from January 1, 2020, through November 30, 2022. This was compared with Californians' internet searches for

“minoxidil” during the study period, using public data from Google Trends.

Immediately following the NYT article’s publication, monthly oral minoxidil prescriptions increased and the 4-month average for new oral minoxidil prescriptions multiplied over 7-fold (from 49 to 352), (**Figure 1**). This coincided with an all-time high for related internet searches (**Figure 2**). The increase in prescriptions seen at our institution suggests that the NYT article greatly influenced consumer demand and prescribing behaviors, more so than any scholarly articles about the treatment.

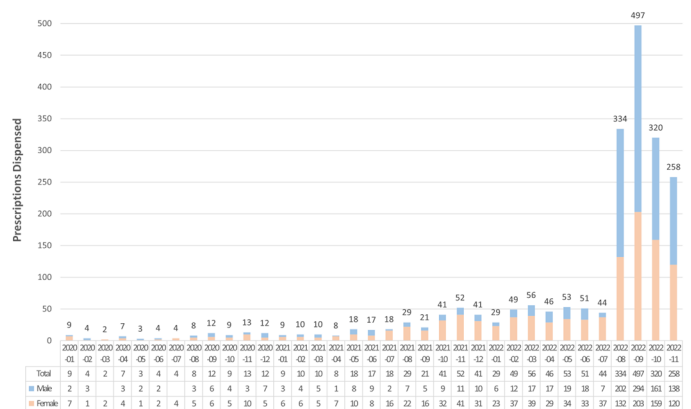


Figure 1. New start outpatient oral minoxidil prescriptions for hair-related diagnoses by month. New start prescriptions increased slightly in 2021 and the first 7 months of 2022, but these were modest compared to the spike in August 2022.

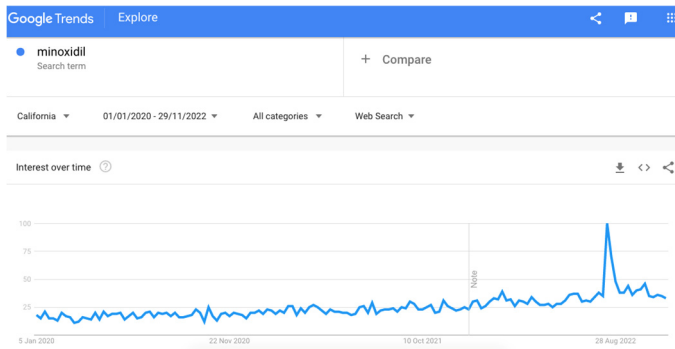


Figure 2. Internet searches for minoxidil. More than ever before or since, Californians searched the internet for the word “minoxidil” immediately following the NYT article’s publication in August 2022.

Within a typical drug marketing campaign, combined methods of paid, earned, and owned media are utilized; these are directed at both consumers and clinicians. Most spending for marketing of pharmaceuticals is directed toward prescribers, which remains high even with new policies which limit industry influence [4]. The American Medical Association has sought to ban direct-to-consumer advertising, which relies on emotional appeals more than results, because it

increases healthcare costs and can mislead patients regarding risks of treatment [5].

The immediate impact of this NYT article suggests that high-profile journalism can alter consumer demand and prescribing behavior in the absence of formal marketing. Since media stories about medications may include inadequate or incomplete information about the benefits, risks, and costs of the drugs [6], clinicians have an important role in filtering that information and coordinating strategic responses to any increase in consumer demand. As the NYT article did not discuss risks or side effects of LDOM, our organization rapidly produced educational materials for KPNC clinicians and patients regarding this inexpensive, off-label therapy. We present this information to underscore the critical responsibility of dermatologists in educating the public via communication with impactful news outlets.

Potential conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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