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UNDERSTANDING XENICAL
Discourses in a Fat-loss Medicating World

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Lydia Jane Barker Stallard

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to gain insight into the different understandings and constructions of the weight-loss drug Xenical, including its various symbolic, social and cultural representations as a weight-loss pharmaceutical, for a range of players. Pharmaceuticals play a central role in contemporary life and we need to understand their function as objects with social and cultural meanings. Weight-loss drugs are particularly interesting as their production, dissemination and consumption are linked to cultural discourses surrounding fatness, body size and health, as well as processes such as medicalisation and pharmaceuticalisation. We sought insight into the meanings that the Xenical holds for various 'players' invested in different stages of its 'lifecycle'. A qualitative design was employed using an in-depth, critical analytical approach, focused on the network of relationships or players surrounding the lifecycle of Xenical. There were seven players of interest representing this network, including pharmacists, dietitians, Xenical forum-users, Xenical non-users, the Roche website for Xenical, Xenical advertisements and news articles on, or relating to, Xenical in some way. The pharmacists, dietitians and non-users were all interviewed about issues relating to weight, weight loss, body size, pharmaceuticals and Xenical, and the four other sites of analysis were analysed for how they constructed and positioned Xenical through language or symbolically. The various ways in which these players discursively represented the drug were identified. These encompassed a range of similar and contradictory meanings for Xenical, reflecting the diverse and competing interests that can arise around a medication, both between players and within individual players. Against a background of issues relating to health, weight, weight loss, safety, side effects and efficacy, as well as processes such as medicalisation and pharmaceuticalisation, our analysis also shed light on why this drug has fallen out of favour in recent years. Thus, this research highlights the transient nature of weight-loss drugs, a possible de-pharmaceuticalisation of fat, and the complex existence of pharmaceuticals as they are located within broader contexts of social understanding.

DEDICATION

To my mother, Wendy Barker, for teaching me to think and learn independently, and my father, Tony Stallard, for being there every step of the way.

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