Uncertainty Avoidance in PILs: A Question of Ethics and Deontology

Enabling patients’ interpretation and correct implementation of the instructions in patient information leaflets (PILs) involves ethical implications in two respects. On the one hand patients’ health and well-being are at stake. But correct usage of prescribed and over-the-counter medication by patients is also part of a country’s financial resources which are apportioned for national health care. This paper aims to investigate how uncertainty avoidance may contribute to follow-up of instructions for use, and what the role of official European guidelines for PILs is in this respect. To evaluate the latter the guidelines on the linguistic quality of patient leaflets developed by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) are examined in greater detail. An important question concerns intercultural differences concerning degree of uncertainty avoidance in PILs and national economic implications. This paper analyses a corpus of German and English PILs for that purpose.

The research questions which are formulated for the analysis are based on the semantic concept of epistemic modality on the one hand for the linguistic expression of degree of (un)certainty. Further research questions are inspired by van Berkel and Gerritsen’s study of intercultural differences between Flemish and Dutch PILs (in print). Their analysis of the impact of cultural differences on style and content of PILs is based on Hofstede’s (2001) concept of uncertainty avoidance as a cultural value to measure people’s behaviour concerning risk management. Comparative criteria in this respect are length of the PIL (incl. amount of detail), structure, specific medical terminology, indication of risks, consequences or adverse effects. With respect to specialised terminology and mention of risks, the degree of elucidation for patients constitutes another important criterion in terms of uncertainty avoidance and managing risks.

References


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