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# Editorials

DRUG INFORMATION | EDITORIAL

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PUBLIC INFORMATION does a lot more good when people can easily get to it. In 2010, the Federal Drug Administration received 759,000 reports of negative side effects from prescription drugs - up from 526,000 in 2008. These reports have been available to the public by filing a Freedom of Information Act request or by downloading raw quarterly data from the FDA's website, but this has required more time, energy, and technical expertise than most citizens have.

Now, thanks to an enterprising start-up called AdverseEvents Inc., patients can search FDA records from what in the past has been an impenetrable database. Patients can now pore over so-called adverse-event reports - documenting symptoms ranging from dizziness to increased blood glucose to heart attacks - for 4,500 commonly prescribed drugs. Another startup, called Clarimed, tracks similar adverse reports to the FDA on 130,000 medical devices.

Ideally, all public records would be available to citizens in an easily searchable form at no cost. But at this point many agencies lack the will and the wherewithal to make that happen, and the public needs that information in the meantime. The cofounder of AdverseEffects, which launched in September and recently started charging \$10 a month for access to its site, has been quoted as saying: "If your doctor tells you to take a drug and it's three times more likely to give you a heart attack than another drug, not having that information seems foolish."

In giving out public information, the FDA and other agencies shouldn't play favorites; they ought to make public information available on the same terms to all companies and individuals who seek it. In practice, though, private firms could will end up playing a crucial role in circulating certain types of public

information. Doctors are busy. The FDA is understaffed. Drug companies spend millions of dollars each year to promote pills to doctors, the press, and public. The Internet and America's penchant for entrepreneurship are in this case good news - helping patients get the information they need.

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