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Ruling Boosts Free Enterprise

FUNDAMENTAL issues concerning freedom of the press and free enterprise are involved in the recent ruling of the Supreme Court that drug firms be allowed to advertise prices of medicines.

The case was built upon the possibility that advertising could result in lower prices, as generally results from open competition, but more basic is the public's right to know and the right of free enterprise firms to advertise wares and services.

Drugs are only one of a number of products and services currently restricted in advertising by federal laws, state laws, regulations, and practitioners' customs. Changes are being made or discussed for legal, medical and optical services.

Frequently overlooked in such discussions is the fact that sellers would not be required to advertise, if they choose not to do so.

Professional ethics is a valid consideration, but it has lost much of its justification because of those who overcharge under restrictions protecting them from competition.

Then, too, professional people sometimes go to considerable lengths to make themselves known in order to attract patronage. One observer remarked: "They seem to be against only the kind of advertising they might have to pay for."

Arguments that advertising would result in inferior products or services are not based upon facts. Whenever merchandise is offered on a free market, the public may choose from several levels of quality and usually from a range of prices.

Inflation and rising costs of living have been capitalized by self-appointed consumer spokesmen to arouse consumer interest in advertising, but prices must be regarded as subsidiary to questions concerning a free press and free enterprise.

Consumer and labor organizations that support advertising often are not consistent in their positions.

Congress has enacted a bill creating a Beef Board to do research and promotion for the troubled cattle industry. It has taken two years to get it through Congress, partly because

of opposition by consumer groups and labor organizations.

The same organizations that have demanded advertising rights for medicines and other products have opposed this bill on grounds that advertising would "brainwash consumers" to buy more meat and lead to other programs of the same sort. They don't seem to feel that way about advertising of drugs, cars and clothing.

Activities of the Beef Board would be supported by a producer-approved check-off system on animals marketed, similar to check-offs regularly used by union labor to collect dues from members on payday. Union leaders close their eyes to this inconsistency, just as consumer groups look in one direction about advertising of drugs and another direction on promotion of beef.

Fewer restrictions on free enterprise, advertising and on consumers themselves would restore responsibility to sellers and buyers alike, and restore some of our lost freedom.