

Breast cancer rates linked to drug company profits

By Minnie Bruce Pratt

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The most common form of breast cancer in the U.S. dropped by 15 percent from 2002 to 2003, says a study just released by the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston.

Researchers believe the reason for this exciting decline may be that millions of women stopped taking hormone replacement therapy (HRT) in 2002. That year a study from the Women's Health Initiative warned that women taking one type of HRT, Prempro, risked higher breast cancer rates. Until that announcement, about a third of U.S. women over the age of 50 took hormone-replacement drugs prescribed by their doctors.

Breast cancer rates had been climbing since 1945, and killed an estimated 40,000 U.S. women a year. Dr. Peter Ravdin, one of the study's authors, said the recent dramatic decline was "the largest for a single cancer in a single year" that he knew of. (New York Times, Dec. 15)

Drug companies and doctors had pushed HRT on women for years, saying it prevented or minimized all sorts of ailments, from heart disease and stroke to bone loss to mental decline. Critics of HRT were ridiculed, studies undertaken to assess the usefulness of HRT were attacked as unnecessary, and their doctors badgered women who resisted taking HRT.

But, as Cynthia Pearson, executive director of the National Women's Health Network, points out: "There was never a single clinical trial that showed that HRT prevented cardiovascular disease or stroke. This is not a story of science moving sedately forward, carefully adding pieces to a puzzle before making recommendations to patients. This is a story of the corruption of the medical and scientific community. The belief that hormones are good preventive medicine has been a triumph of marketing over science." (www.womenshealthnetwork.org)

Drug companies spend an average of \$10,000 to \$15,000 in marketing per physician per year. They offer doctors office catering, lavish dinners and even free cruises. It has been shown that the factor with the most influence on doctors' prescribing practice is visits from pharmaceutical representatives. Drug companies fund studies and pay physicians to give talks at conferences, and spend more than twice as much on advertising and marketing as on research. (Family Therapy Network, March 2000 and www.gayhealth.com)

For the launch of early HRT sales, pharmaceutical companies used some of the most insidious and powerful of these marketing techniques.

In the 1960s, the main popularizer of HRT as "supplemental estrogen" was gynecologist Robert Wilson. In his book "Feminine Forever," Wilson used sexist, heterosexist and ageist reasons to make the natural end of the reproductive process in women seem like a dreadful fate—what he termed the "vapid cow-like state" of menopause. He crisscrossed the U.S. promoting his ideas—and by 1975 Wyeth's HRT drug Premarin was the fifth-most-prescribed medicine in the U.S. (New York Times, July 10, 2002)

After Wilson's death in 1981, his son revealed that Wyeth Pharmaceuticals (as Wyeth-Ayerst) had paid all of Wilson's expenses for "Feminine Forever" and for his so-called "research institute."

In 2001, before HRT dangers were publicized, drug giant Wyeth earned \$900 million in sales from Prempro. The next year its sales dropped 50 percent in six months. (New York Times, July 17, 2002)

To make their millions, drug companies have continued to market HRT products in the teeth of evidence that shows the drugs actively harm women and in fact bring on disease and death. Solvay Pharmaceuticals has sold the HRT Estratest, an estrogen/testosterone combination, for 25 years without ever having received Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval, despite the fact that the Nurses' Health Study shows that the drug increases breast cancer risks in women. The National Women's Health Network has filed a citizens' petition with the FDA in an attempt to halt the sales. (NWHN Alerts, Aug. 28)

Lack of science, distortion and suppression of facts, marketing hype and failure to consider the common good is "business as usual" for big pharmaceutical companies. Their drive for profits brings additional sickness and suffering to people all over the world.

A Dec. 17 New York Times article points out that "The drug maker Eli Lilly has engaged in a decade-long effort to play down the health risks of Zyprexa, its best-selling medication for schizophrenia," and continues to reveal severe problems of obesity and diabetes that the company's own published data supports. Lilly sold \$4.2 billion worth of the drug worldwide in 2005.

Pharmaceutical giants like Glaxo Smith Kline have worked ferociously to block distribution and manufacture of generic versions of their HIV/AIDS drugs. As the AIDS epidemic accelerates in Africa, India and the Pacific Rim countries, affecting women in particular in growing numbers, U.S. drug companies jockey to increase their profits by retaining their drug patents.

Of the recent study linking Wyeth's HRT drug to breast cancer, a spokeswoman for the company said, "Clearly, more

studies are warranted.”

On the contrary, what is warranted is the removal of the profit motive from the health care system through the establishment of a public health program in which people’s needs are the primary criteria for all decisions. For how this might be possible, the world can look to the magnificent health system of socialist Cuba.

- Related link: [Profits are hazardous to women's health](#)

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