

# Novartis switched patients' drugs without consent

A report by the British consumer group, the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI) accuses Swiss drugmaker Novartis of putting patients at risk by having its representatives switch patients to the company's own drugs without telling their doctors.

The ABPI's Prescription Medicines Code of Practice Authority released a report that stated patients on cholesterol-lowering and anti-hypertensive medications had been switched to Novartis's drugs by Novartis representatives. Company representatives were asked by a medical practice in Leeds, England, to do an audit of the use of statins for patients with ischemic heart disease.

After reviewing the drugs being prescribed, the company rep switched all of the patients from other statins to Novartis' fluvastatin. The switch was made without discussing the matter with -- or obtaining permission from -- any of the practitioners. "Also, and without discussion with the practice manager or the doctor, all of the patients on any of the statin medicines were switched to valsartan," the report noted.

The board ruled that such actions could have "compromised patient safety" and pointed to the possibility that the company representatives were offered financial incentives to switch patients to Novartis products, a practice condemned by industry guidelines. "Overall, the appeal board considered that Novartis had brought discredit upon and reduced confidence in the pharmaceutical industry," the organization concluded.

Novartis' own company guidelines specify that changes in a patient's therapy cannot be made without authorization from two practice partners, and later publicly slapped the reps' hands for the transgression. "The representatives who had failed to follow company procedures in relation to the audit were reprimanded and retrained in the light of these events," the company announced. The company is confident that this was an isolated incident which should not detract from the quality and value of this audit process which has been repeatedly demonstrated in clinical practice."

Not all medical experts agreed.

In a statement released shortly afterwards, Dr. John Chisholm, chairman of the British Medical Association's General Practitioners Committee, said that Novartis had -- in the judgement of the industry's own watchdog -- behaved contrary to the company's stated guidelines and had discredited the pharmaceutical industry.

"It is important that doctors check prescriptions that they issue to ensure that patients receive the medicines that it is intended they should receive. Doctors are ultimately responsible for prescribing decisions," he noted.

Novartis did win approval from some sectors, however. Days later, it was named "Company of the Year" by the *Med Ad News*, a publication devoted to drug advertising. It was honored for its part in increasing the global market for pharmaceuticals, which was valued at \$325 billion in 2000, up 11% from 1999.

**SOURCES:** *BMA News*, Sept. 14, 2001.

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