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Trastuzumab wins backing of European drug regulator

Trastuzumab (Herceptin), the breast cancer drug at the centre of a row over rationing in the NHS, last week won the first stage of approval by the European drug regulator for use in treating early stage cancer.

A committee of the European Medicines Agency, which licenses drugs for European Union countries, backed the extension of the drug's licence to include early stage disease in a record 10 weeks from application.

The recommendation, from the agency's committee for medicinal products for human use, is for the use of trastuzumab after surgery and as standard chemotherapy for the early stages of the HER2 positive type of breast cancer. It will go to a full meeting of the agency for ratification, which could come within six weeks.

A cost effectiveness assessment fast tracked by the UK's National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) could see a decision on use of the drug for early stage cancer in England and Wales by July.

The drug is already licensed by the European agency and approved by NICE for metastatic cancer, and NHS trusts have come under strong pressure to make it available for women with early cancer whose oncologists recommend it.

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

Watchdog gives spoof awards for aggressive marketing of drugs

The lobbying group of the US drug industry, Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA), last week won two spoof awards from a watchdog that tracks aggressive and misleading marketing by the industry.

PhRMA led the field in the second annual Bitter Pill awards, winning prizes in two categories

CDC/JAMES GATHANY

Malaria experts criticise World Bank

Malaria experts from around the world have accused the World Bank of publishing false statistics and approving ineffective malaria control measures. They have called on the bank to relinquish its funding to other agencies better equipped to fight the disease.

Writing in the online edition of the *Lancet*, the experts, led by Amir Attaran from the University of Ottawa in Canada, suggested that since the launch of the Roll Back Malaria programme, the bank has consistently decreased the funds it allotted for malaria control programmes around the world, and particularly in Africa.

The World Bank had claimed that its malaria programmes in India and Brazil were highly successful, resulting in reduction rates as high as 98% in the state of Maharashtra in India. But in their report Professor Attaran and colleagues write: "Most of the statistical errors we located exaggerate the performance of the Bank's projects."

They conclude that the World Bank should have no role beyond providing "unprogrammed financing" and that it should wind down with "speed and grace" its projects to fight the disease, which is commonly spread by the female *Anopheles* mosquito (above).

However, the bank says that the accusations of financial concealment are untrue and that the statistics advanced by the bank were consistent with all other available data.

Balaji Ravichandran *BMJ*

The experts' article is available at www.thelancet.com (doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(06)68545-0), with links to two related articles.

from the Prescription Access Litigation Project, a national umbrella organisation of 118 consumer health advocacy groups.

Aggressive marketing is driving up health costs and encouraging patients to take drugs they do not need, argued Jerry Avorn, a professor at Harvard Medical School and one of the organisers of the awards.

The first of the two awards was for the organisation's guidelines on direct to consumer advertising, which the consumer pressure group claimed were ineffective, not least because they had no enforcement mechanism. It was called the "Fox Guarding

the Hen House" award.

PhRMA received even less flattering recognition with the "Truth is Stranger than Fiction" award, for "commissioning a hackneyed thriller to scare Americans about Canadian drugs."

In an effort to discourage drug purchasing across the border the PhRMA consultant Mark Barondess last year persuaded the industry group to spend \$100 000 (£54 600; €79 300) underwriting a thriller in which Islamic terrorists put poison in Canadian generic drugs to kill American consumers (*BMJ* 2005;331:1103).

Owen Dyer *London*

Healthcare Commission to review independent treatment centres

The standard of care in independent sector treatment centres (ISTCs) is to be investigated by the NHS's watchdog, the Healthcare Commission, MPs have been told. The health secretary Patricia Hewitt, giving evidence to the health select committee last week in its inquiry into these centres, announced that she had asked the commission to review them.

The ISTCs, of which there are 20 in England and more planned, first opened in 2003 under an agreement between the NHS and the private sector to carry out specific procedures to help with the NHS's waiting lists and shortage of capacity.

Ms Hewitt told the select committee that although existing evidence indicated that the centres provide a high quality service, she had heard some concerns from clinicians and professional bodies. She had, therefore, asked the Healthcare Commission for a wide ranging clinical audit to be reported by the end of the year. "The outcome we want is high and consistent standards of clinical and non-clinical quality of care for patients in NHS and independent sector providers," Ms Hewitt told the MPs.

Adrian O'Dowd *London*

NHS should remain funded by tax

A coalition of the 12 leading NHS representative organisations and charities has made a public declaration calling for the preservation of an NHS funded through taxation. The bodies, which represent at least one million doctors, nurses, midwives, managers, and patients, collectively united to declare their commitment to the continuation of a "free and fair" NHS. The United Kingdom has one of the fairest healthcare