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SUMMER 2005

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Horseshoes, hand grenades...and pharmaceuticals? Vioxx teaches us that "close enough" is far from good enough.

The classic, standard argument in favor of animal testing is that animals, particularly primates, are similar to human beings. Thus, the results of tests run on animals are indicative of the effects that a given procedure, drug, etc will have on a human being.

But when is close enough really good enough? Maybe when you are substituting brown for white sugar in a cookie recipe or your left rear wheel goes a little over the line of a parking space at the shopping center, but not when a major pharmaceutical company relies on the results of tests run on African green monkeys to prove their drug is safe when the clearly more relevant study of human users indicated the exact opposite.

That's why a lawsuit has recently been filed against Merck, the makers of Vioxx, an arthritis pain medication, which ultimately seeks to prove that Merck's reliance on animal data was a violation of Merck's legal and ethical obligations.

The suit is of particular significance not only to legal and scientific communities but the animal activist community as well. Out of the approximately 3,800 lawsuits currently pending against Merck, this suit is the first to focus on the use of animal testing data as a major contributing factor in the injuries suffered by users of Vioxx. It reiterates what anti-vivisectionists have known and argued for years and years: primates are not humans. Therefore, it is illogical, and even irresponsible, to expect that testing a drug on primates will accurately predict the effects that same drug will have on people.

If, then, tests performed on primates are in-

adequate to reveal a drug's lethal side effects *before* they are prescribed and sold to human beings on the open market, aren't people the real lab rats? Vioxx is evidence that the answer to this question is yes. It is also evidence of a serious weakness in one of the key arguments in favor of testing on primates: that it is worth sacrificing the lives of animals to prevent human suffering. Unfortunately, however, under the current system, both humans and primates suffer.

The reported incidents of heart attacks, strokes, or even death suffered by Vioxx users as a result of taking the drug is not the only proof that primate testing does not alleviate human suffering. The number of people who have been and will be indirectly affected by the fallout from the withdrawal of Vioxx is not to be underestimated.

Tort reform was a hot button issue in 2004 elections because of its alleged relationship to the ris-

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ing costs of health care. Google “Vioxx” and the plethora of ads for Vioxx attorneys that pops up leaves no question that this tragic controversy has spawned its own cottage industry within the legal profession, promising hundreds, if not thousands, more lawsuits in the near future. If the award of astronomically high pain and suffering damages to victims of medical malpractice can be linked to the lack of affordable health care in the United States, then surely the financial devastation Merck will suffer when these suits are settled will make pharmaceutical drugs even more unaffordable than they already are for the 40 million some Americans without health insurance.

It is not only the American pharmaceutical consumer that is indirectly harmed when pharmaceutical companies settle for “close enough.” Both stockholders and the pharmaceutical companies are hit hard in the pocketbook. Consequently,

the economy suffers and the innovation of new pharmaceuticals is hindered. For instance, the recall of Vioxx, which allegedly accounted for approximately 10% of Merck’s revenue in 2003, caused a 27% decrease in Merck stock value on the day of the recall and a 0.6% drop in the Dow Jones industrial average. Again, if primate testing is supposedly a necessary evil to the laudable goal of alleviating human suffering, then settling for “close enough” accomplishes the exact opposite. Unforeseen life-threatening side-effects drag down our nation’s economy and force pharmaceutical companies to allocate funds to cleaning up their mess that could have otherwise been put toward the development of newer and better pharmaceuticals.

Unfortunately, the problem is not isolated to Vioxx and Merck. The Journal



of the American Medical Association has reported that more than 100,000 humans die each year as a result of adverse reactions to prescription drugs—adverse reactions that went undetected despite several series of tests on several species of animals. Further, over 50 FDA-approved drugs have been taken off the market or relabeled in the past 25 years also because “adverse reactions.”

The bottom line is that no matter what an individual’s stake in the pharmaceutical industry is—animal rights, medical innovation, or successfully diversifying their portfolio—we are all losers when we accept close enough as good enough.

Jessica Trenchik was our guest columnist for the Summer 2005 Congressional Educator. We thank her for her contribution.

*Past issues of the Congressional
Educator can be found at
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