

January, 2008

January edition of M.D. Pharmacy's monthly newsletter. Articles regarding your medications, their safety, and the politics behind the price you pay for them. Please share this with your neighbors.

Before we get into the newsletter, please accept our wishes for a healthy, happy New Year!

New warnings on Avandia

Just as the dust is settling on the Avandia heart–failure issues, the popular diabetes drug is feared to cause an increase in bone thinning.

Though not yet fully explored, this could help explain why diabetics can have an increased risk of fractures. "Considering the widespread use of these drugs and the known action in people it is surprising that such a key observation had been missed" said Ronald M. Evans of the Salk Institute for Biological Studies. Avandia is one of the most popular drugs used to treat Type II diabetes.

Medication timing may help heart and kidneys

"Switching the time of day blood pressure medication is taken could help some patients avoid kidney and heart complications", according to a study published in the American Journal of Kidney Diseases. The study is built on the basis of the common observation that anti-hypertension drugs work best in the first hours after they are taken. The National Kidney Foundation points out that the simple act of taking a pill at night instead of first thing in the morning can have an important effect on the health of patients with chronic kidney disease who are particularly vulnerable to cardiovascular and kidney complications.

Novartis Plans Four New Cancer Drugs

Most big pharmaceutical companies are increasing their investments in cancer research, a segment that has experienced strong sales growth in recent years while other therapeutic areas have flagged. Drug companies have found that they can price effective cancer drugs at a high level, making them particularly profitable. Novartis has said that at least one of its four new drugs could eventually achieve sales of one Billion dollars or more annually, starting in 2011. None of the drugs have as yet been approved for use in humans.

Humana on the hot seat for "deceptive marketing practices" for Medicare Part D plans

The state of Oklahoma used its limited authority to fine Humana almost as much as the federal government has fined all Medicare Advantage players combined. Still the state felt that it had uncovered serious abuses that deserved far harsher punishment, but under law \$500,000 is the maximum amount they could fine the company. Oklahoma insurance commissioner, Kim Holland said in a recent interview "if we could have fully exercised our authority it (the fine) would have been a whole lot more". Now, frustrated state commissioners are increasingly calling for reforms. (ed. note: Amen!).

Big Pharma faces grim prognosis

Over the next few years the pharmaceutical manufacturing industry will lose patent protection on most of their billion dollar blockbuster drugs. Some of the top-selling drugs in the industry's history will become history as patent protections expire, allowing generics to rush in at much lower prices. Generic competition is expected to wipe \$67 Billion from top companies' annual U.S. sales between 2007 and 2012 as more than three dozen drugs lose patent protection. At the same time, the industry's science-engine has stalled, unable to come up with any significant replacements for the patent-expired drugs, such as Lipitor, Plavix and Zyprexa. Typical gross margins for Big Pharma's patent-protected drugs show high profitability with profit margins around 90% to 95%. The loss of these drugs' estimated sales will cause a decline of revenue for Big Pharma, which would be the first decline in nearly four decades.

Influenza doubles risk of heart attack or stroke

According to a study published in the European Heart Journal, the potential risk of experiencing a fatal heart attack or stroke doubles in the week following a respiratory infection, but recedes soon after. Scientists say the study provides convincing evidence that people with heart trouble should get a flu shot every year.

The pharmacists and staff at M.D. Pharmacy, your neighborhood pharmacy.

February, 2008

***February edition of M.D. Pharmacy's monthly newsletter.
Articles regarding your medications, their safety, and the
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with your neighbors.***

Arthritis Drug May Help Treat Alzheimer's

A U.S. study documents the therapeutic effect "within minutes" of the drug etanercept injected into the spine of an Alzheimer's patient. Etanercept, known

as Enbrel is used to treat autoimmune diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis. Its action is to inactivate excess tumor necrosis factor-alpha, or TNF, which regulates the transmission of nerve impulses in the brain. Excess TNF-alpha has been documented in the cerebrospinal fluid of patients with Alzheimer's. The article discusses one patient, but many other patients with mild to severe Alzheimer's received the treatment, and all have shown sustained and marked improvement.

FDA Warns of Risks of Osteoporosis Drugs

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is warning doctors to watch out for patients reporting severe and sometimes incapacitating bone, joint, or muscle pain, who are taking bisphosphonates (Actonel, Fosamax, Boniva, Zometa and Reclast). Although severe pain is included in the prescribing information for doctors, the association between bisphosphonates and severe musculoskeletal pain may be overlooked by health care professionals, delaying diagnosis, and prolonging pain and/or impairment for the patient. The pain may occur within days, months or years after starting a bisphosphonate. Doctors should consider whether bisphosphonate use might be responsible for these symptoms, and consider temporary or permanent discontinuation of the drug.

Prices Under Medicare Drug Plans Questioned

The publisher of Consumer Reports magazine says many Medicare Part D plans are raising prices well in excess of the rate of inflation. The non-profit Consumer's Union said that proves senior citizens and taxpayers aren't getting a good deal on Part D, which it says costs taxpayers about \$60 billion annually. Another study published in the Annals of Internal Medicine also argues that Part D is not a good value, and that patients are paying only \$8 or \$9 less for drugs than they would have without the Plan. One of the criticisms of Part D is that, while seniors are locked into their plan for a year, the plans can and do raise prices whenever they want. Consumer's Union said that some of the biggest increases involved Aetna plans. One of the causes is the onerous provision in the 2003 law that created Part D, which prohibits Medicare from negotiating volume discounts on behalf of seniors. This part of the law of course, was bought and paid for by the insurance and pharmaceutical manufacturer's lobbyists, who spent millions of your dollars to ensure their profitability.

Many Drug Web Sites Falsely Claiming Certification

The Better Business Bureau and other professional groups are complaining to federal regulators that some internet pharmacies are falsely claiming they are certified by their organizations, leaving dissatisfied consumers with nowhere to turn. The FBI has received

reports about false trademarks and certifications from the certifying agencies and consumers. The law enforcement agency has started a special investigation of internet pharmacy practices, including the trademark violations and other issues. Detecting the phonies can be tricky, as some sites copy the letterhead and seal from legitimate certifying agencies. Others make up bogus organizations, such as the "American Drug Administration", a nonexistent agency whose mock red, white and blue seal mimics that of the U.S. FDA.

Statins Could Lower Prostate Cancer Risk

Cholesterol-lowering drugs might also reduce the risk of prostate cancer, say researchers. The drugs known as statins appear to have the greatest effect in more aggressive forms of the disease, which accounts for one in five of all new male malignancies, with more than 30,000 new cases a year. Oregon Univ. researchers found statin use was associated with a 62 per cent reduction in the risk of cancer.

Medicare Private Plan Abuses

Heavily subsidized private Medicare plans are continuing to prey on elderly Americans despite state, federal and industry efforts to stop them. These plans are a financial drag on Medicare, as the government pays them about 12% more, on average, than the same services would cost in the traditional Medicare program. All too often, the private plans are an ethical horror as well. (New York Times editorial)

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March, 2008

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Four Ways to Avoid Dangerous Drug Errors

There were more than 1400 common medications used erroneously between 2003 and 2006, sometimes causing patient harm or death- because the drug name either looked or sounded like that of another drug. Sometimes, a busy pharmacist misreads a prescription, or a nurse just hears the doctor wrong. The United States Pharmacopeia- a private nonprofit organization that promotes safe use of medications has released the following tips on how you can keep yourself from ending up a victim.

1. When you get a new prescription, make time to talk with your pharmacist and find out the proper pronunciation of the medication and its correct spelling, but try to avoid reordering the prescription by name. Instead, try to use the prescription number on the label.
2. Ask your doctor to write the correct indication for use (that is, the medical problem for which you're taking the medicine) on the prescription itself. A simple "for sinus" or "for backache" helps the pharmacist ensure that no mix-ups occur. That same information on the prescription label may help prevent you from confusing it with other medications on your shelf at home, as well.
3. Check the label when you pick up your prescription or when it's delivered to you. Is it the same medication and dosage your doctor prescribed? Are the directions for taking the medication clear? If not, consult your pharmacist for clarification or re-wording.
4. Consult a drug information guide, preferably with color photos for comparison with your own medications. Such information is readily available through the pharmacist's computer program.

Patients see "red" when paying for new "green" asthma inhalers

The old devices-called CFC inhalers-will be banned for use in the U.S.A. on December 31st, but are already becoming extremely difficult to find, as manufacturers began phasing them out a year or two ago, in favor of new inhalers using HFA, a more ozone friendly propellant. There is no difference in effectiveness, but they are far more expensive, and require some getting used to. Overall, prices of the new HFA inhalers are higher because there are no generic versions, which means higher co-payments for the brand-name drugs. The new inhalers typically cost from \$45 to \$65. There is hope however, that these prices will drop in the future.

Ending the Tobacco Problem

Nearly half a million deaths are caused each year in the United States by tobacco use and exposure to secondhand smoke. Meanwhile, 1 of 5 adults continues to smoke, and if they continue, nearly half will die prematurely. We spend about \$89 billion per year on healthcare for smoking-related conditions. The Institute of Medicine recommends that Congress should give the Food and Drug Administration, or similar regulatory agency, authority over the manufacture, distribution, marketing, and use of tobacco products. The federal government should also reduce the level of nicotine in tobacco products, which could reduce dependency, and make it easier to quit. Tobacco cessation programs should be covered in all healthcare plans.

Activity and Moderate Drinking is Key to a Long Life

Both physical activity and a moderate alcohol intake are important to lower the risk of fatal heart disease and all-cause mortality, a new study shows. People who neither drink alcohol nor exercise have a 30% to 49% higher risk of heart disease than those who either drink, exercise, or do both. In a non-related study, research indicates that physical activity reduces the risk of colon cancer. While just an hour of walking a week seemed to protect against the disease, the more strenuously the women exercised, the lower their risk.

New Flu Vaccine May Not Need Needles

The International Vaccine Institute reported that two doses of influenza vaccine under the tongue of mice primed the animals'™ immune system to fight off what would otherwise have been a deadly dose of flu. A couple of drops of liquid under the tongue gets the vaccine directly to mucus membranes and prompts a response both in mucus tissues throughout the body as well as in the immune system itself, the researchers said. "If these findings are replicated in humans, they could pave the way for a new generation of vaccines that could be used for mass vaccinations against respiratory infections, including the pandemic avian-human influenza viruses.

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Budget Proposes \$560 Billion Cut in Medicare, but Insurance Companies' Subsidy Remains Intact

Government subsidies to insurance companies worth an estimated \$150 Billion over the next decade will remain untouched, while the Bush administration would cut roughly \$560 Billion in benefit money from the Medicare program over the same period. The Bush White House has fought congressional efforts to cut subsidized payments to insurers in the past, and argues in the new budget request that the "sweetheart" subsidies allow insurers to "offer beneficiaries greater choices and higher-quality health care". Without citing meaningful examples, the budget says that it "proposes to encourage greater individual responsibility for health care choices and costs". The Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services estimates that the overpayments to insurers increase costs and will shorten the program's fiscal solvency by two years. (Wall Street Journal)

Proposal Would Increase Medicare Premiums

The Bush administration's proposal calls for reduced subsidies for single people with incomes greater than \$82,000 and married couples with incomes greater than \$164,000. Rep. John Dingell, D-Mich., chairman of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, said the proposal would unfairly shift more costs to seniors. Dingell was quoted saying "the President's idea for 'improving' the program is to stick the beneficiaries with more of the bill". (United Press International).

Heart Drug Compliance Saves Lives, Costs

A U.S. study found that 50 percent of heart patients significantly under-use medications to prevent recurrence of heart attacks, mainly because of cost. The study, published in the Journal of the American Heart Association, found if heart attack survivors had full heart drug compliance, -average cost of the drugs is more than \$400 per year-it could help heart attack survivors live longer, better lives and lower the nation's health-care costs. A combination of a beta-blocker, a statin, an angiotensin-converting-enzyme inhibitor (ACE inhibitor) and aspirin has reduced coronary heart disease death by 80 percent compared to placebo. (United Press International)

Medicare Advantage Plans Ripe for Fraud

Medicare Advantage plans can be an attractive solution for many seniors, but the plans are also ripe for fraud because the government gives private insurers generous subsidies to sign people up. To grab a lucrative share of the action, insurers pay agents commissions ranging from \$60 to \$80 for each person they enroll in a Part D prescription drug plan, but they get a whopping \$400 to \$500 for enrolling someone in a Medicare Advantage plan according to a report by the Medicare Rights Center. The result may be a hard sell, with agents pushing Medicare Advantage rather than Part D. Those commissions may be an incentive to commit fraud. Several incidents of fraudulent activities have already been recorded. (Kiplinger's Personal Finance)

FDA: More Foreign Inspectors Needed

The Food and Drug Administration needs more inspectors and a comprehensive computer database to better track products entering the United States from a growing number of drug manufacturers, brokers and distributors, said a top drug safety official to lawmakers. The FDA focuses its inspections on domestic companies, with about 1200 inspections annually in the U.S. Meanwhile, only about 300 foreign facilities are inspected each year, accounting for only about 10 percent of the firms shipping prescription drugs or their ingredients into the U.S. This small number of inspections seemed particularly relevant this month as a result of concerns about the blood thinner Heparin, which has been linked to four deaths, and adverse reactions in about 350 other patients. Millions of patients take the drug every year to avoid potentially life-threatening blood clots. The FDA

was to have inspected the Chinese maker of an ingredient of the drug, but apparently inspected the wrong factory, and the wrong firm was entered into the FDA database. Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., chairman of the panel responsible for funding the FDA called the case "embarrassing", but more than that, it helped demonstrate the FDA's "myriad failures under the Bush administration. (Associated Press)

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Celebrex at high doses may raise heart attack risk.

A new study by the American College of Cardiology shows that Pfizer's arthritis and pain drug Celebrex, which was prescribed 11 million times last year, may pose a danger to the hearts of people taking high doses or who have heart disease, high cholesterol, diabetes, and smokers. Patients taking the largest dose of Celebrex of 400mg. twice daily tripled their chance of heart attack or stroke compared with people taking a placebo. A lower dose of only 200mg. twice daily still resulted in double the risk of heart attack. Celebrex is of the same class of drug as Vioxx, which was pulled from the market in 2004 for increasing the risk of heart attack and stroke. Doctors had been cautioned at that time that Celebrex and other painkillers, including Ibuprofen (Advil) and Naproxyn (Aleve) should be prescribed at the lowest possible dose. (Bloomberg News)

Vytorin study slaps makers.

Two year old clinical data show that the combination cholesterol drug 'Vytorin' (Zocor + Zetia) was no more effective at limiting plaque buildup than Zocor alone. Zocor is one of several statin drugs that are now available generically, at substantial savings for patients. New York State and Federal officials have been investigating why results of the study were not released for nearly two years after the study ended. Ironically, the makers of Vytorin (Merck and partner Schering-Plough) continue to spend hundreds of millions of dollars in direct to consumer ads, including full page ads in major newspapers across the country, and ubiquitous television commercials to boost sales of their \$5billion a year product. The Senate Finance Committee said that even the researcher who led a crucial study of the drug angrily accused the makers of withholding negative results to boost sales. (Associated Press).

Blood Pressure Drugs Help Elderly.

Some doctors believe that higher blood pressure readings in older people are natural and therefore do not treat it. But the Imperial College London study of nearly 4000 elderly patients with high blood pressure found drug treatments reduced their death rates by a fifth. Two thirds of people over 80 have high blood pressure which increases the risk of strokes and heart problems. (BBC News).

Medication Worsens Alzheimer's.

Anti-psychotic drugs commonly given to Alzheimer's patients often makes their condition worse, a UK study suggests. The drugs in question, known as neuroleptics, which include Mellaril, Thorazine, Haldol, Stelazine and Risperdal, provided no benefit for patients with mild behavioral problems, but were associated with a marked deterioration in verbal skills. Up to 60% of Alzheimer's patients in nursing homes are given the drugs to control problems such as aggression. The Alzheimer's Society said previous research had also shown that the anti-psychotic drugs (neuroleptics) raised the risk of stroke and death for people with dementia. The use of these major tranquilizing drugs in nursing homes indicates that they are being used to make patients more controllable by the staff. (BBC News).

ADHD drugs not linked to future drug abuse.

Contrary to long-held suspicions, using stimulants like Ritalin to treat attention-deficit-hyperactivity disorder in children does not seem to boost the risk of later substance abuse. Paradoxically, in adults these same drugs can be stimulating, very addictive, and tend to be abused, but their use in already hyperactive children has the opposite effect, producing a calming effect, enabling the children to be less disruptive in school, more attentive, and increasing their concentration and positively affecting their impulsive behavior. (Reuters).

Lipitor Provides Unexpectedly Potent Heart Benefit.

Pfizer recently announced that Lipitor (atorvastatin calcium) 80mg showed unexpectedly potent reduction in myocardial ischemia (a condition defined by insufficient blood supply and oxygen to the heart) in patients with chronic stable angina (chest pain). Lipitor reduced the average number of ischemic events by nearly 70% and total duration of events by more than 60% from baseline.

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You Like Us: Two Independent Consumer Surveys.

Be sure you read the June issue of Consumer Reports and the article "America's Best Drugstores". Once again (for the eighth straight year) independent pharmacies won the highest rating over chains, supermarkets, and mass merchants in the category of overall customer satisfaction including service, knowledge, speed, and product in stock. The good news from Consumer Reports coincides with impressive survey results from the just-released 2008 WilsonRx Pharmacy Satisfaction Survey based on more than 34,000 responses to written questionnaires in which independents scored 92 out of 100 in the above categories. Ironically, along with these supportive reports, there has arisen a moral and ethical question regarding those patients who have been urged to use their insurance company's mail-order pharmacy. In hundreds of instances, the mail-order pharmacy has failed to supply the patient's medications in a timely manner, resulting in the burden of patient care to fall upon us, the independent neighborhood pharmacy, to provide emergency supplies to patients who have either switched their allegiance to mail-order, or who have never been, nor ever will be "our" customers. Providing this necessarily immediate service to non-customers places a costly drain upon our professional resources, technician time, inventory, and delivery expense, and negatively impacts the quality of care we are able to provide to our loyal customer base. These circumstances beg the question, "should the neighborhood pharmacy be responsible for covering the inadequacies of insurance company-owned mail-order pharmacies?"

Common Drugs Hasten Decline In Elderly: Study

Elderly people who took commonly prescribed drugs for incontinence, allergy, or high blood pressure walked more slowly, and were less able to take care of themselves than others not taking the drugs, U.S. researchers said recently. These medications block a chemical in the nervous system (acetylcholine) which is a messenger critical for memory. The results were true even in older adults who have normal memory and thinking abilities, although the study of 3,000 people included 40 percent who were taking more than one of the drugs. The effect is essentially that of a three-to-four-year increase in age. The tricky part... is that many useful drugs from many different classes demonstrate these properties, but in many cases newer drugs are available that do not have these effects, and that doctors should look out for them in elderly patients. (Reuters)

Doctors Say Insurers Step Over The Line.

For years a New Jersey patient took a prescription drug to keep his blood pressure stable. Then his Medicare Part D plan changed, and his new insurance carrier would no longer pay for the drug, but insisted that his doctor change his drug to one that was on their "formulary". His doctor wrote letters to appeal, to no avail. "My blood pressure went up astronomically on the new drugs," said the 57 year old disabled man. Another man tells a similar story. His doctor gave him a sample of Aciphex to treat his stomach ailment. The 64 –year old man said the drug worked like a charm. "Then I took the prescription to the pharmacy and they told me my insurance company said I had to try Prevacid first," he said. The substitute drug did not work as well, and now he's thinking of paying for the first-choice drug out of his pocket. Both men have come face to face with "step-therapy", the insurance company's way to require patients to try (and fail) with lower-cost medicines before they will pay for more expensive, but more effective newer drugs. Despite the insurance companies' claim that step-therapy is needed to curtail the nation's soaring drug costs, and offset advertising that pushes expensive brand name drugs, to doctors and patients the strategy is akin to the insurance companies practicing medicine, in order to enhance their already record profits. Doctors must call the insurance company in order to obtain authorization to prescribe a denied drug, but one physician said that he could not appeal every denial. "There is no such thing as a simple phone call to an insurance company," he said. "Every call takes 30 to 60 minutes." (New Jersey Star-Ledger)

Prozac May Help Slow Multiple Sclerosis.

The anti-depressant Prozac may help curb disease activity in the relapsing remitting form of multiple sclerosis, a Dutch study said.

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Researchers Fail to Reveal Full Drug Pay.

Millions of dollars were paid to at least three renowned Harvard child psychiatrists by several prescription drug manufacturers for "consulting fees" which were largely responsible for the explosion in the over-use of dangerous antipsychotic medicines in children. The named doctors also failed to report this income to the university with which they were affiliated, thereby possibly violating federal and university research rules designed to police potential conflicts of

interest. Some of their research is financed by government grants. The Harvard group's consulting arrangements with drug makers were already controversial because of the researchers' advocacy of unapproved uses of psychiatric medicines in children. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) is investigating what they referred to as "completely unacceptable behavior, and NIH will not tolerate it." These bribes, plus an additional \$287million dollars in NIH (taxpayer derived) grants, constitute what the drug makers refer to as their "research and development costs". (New York Times).

Another National Poll Ranks Community CCRx #1 In Medicare Part D Plan.

Wilson Health Information, a leading consumer insight firm, names MemberHealth's Community CCRx the highest rated Medicare Part D plan in overall member satisfaction, reenrollment and recommendation intentions. Wilson Health Information LLC is an independent healthcare consumer research company. (YellowBrix, Inc.)

E-prescriptions Gain Momentum.

Electronically sending prescriptions to your pharmacy is starting to catch on with doctors as an often safer, faster and cheaper alternative to faxes or paper. Eliminating the infamous doctor's scrawl may reduce human error. We are proud to announce that we at M.D. Pharmacy have already installed the necessary equipment and computer software and training to participate in this cutting edge service.

Group Urges More Home Blood Pressure Checks.

Everyone with high blood pressure-some 72 million Americans-should own a home monitor and do regular pressure checks, the American Heart Association and other groups urged, in an unprecedented endorsement of a medical device for consumers. High blood pressure is a leading cause of heart attacks, strokes and death. Having it checked a few times a year by a physician or pharmacist is not enough to keep tabs on it, and regular home monitoring is more accurate. If you would like to purchase an easy-to-use blood pressure monitor for home use, M.D. Pharmacy carries several different convenient and inexpensive models. (Associated Press).

Consumer Rip-offs Benefit Drug "Managers".

In separate court cases and out-of-court agreements recently, CVS Caremark (a pharmacy benefits manager and retailer), Omnicare (nursing-home prescription providers), Walgreens (the 800 pound gorilla), Express Scripts (pharmacy benefits manager and mail-order drug provider), Medco Health Solutions (pharmacy benefits manager and mail-order provider), and Caremark RX (pharmacy benefits manager and mail-order provider) agreed to pay over \$300

Million dollars to settle claims that they improperly switched patients' prescriptions to more expensive ones in order to increase their reimbursement from Medicaid, according to a Federal Justice Department announcement. The "benefit managers" also profited by receiving drug maker rebates which were never passed on to consumers, and provided no additional medical benefit to the patients, in violation of federal and state regulations. The Walgreens suit was filed by a pharmacist who was temporarily employed by Walgreens, after being fired by Omnicare for reporting their abuses. (NCPA/Yellowbrix)

Fish-Oil Supplements Plus Regular Aerobic Exercise Benefit Overweight Patients.

According to results of a study published in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, fish-oil supplements and regular aerobic exercise reduced body fat and improved cardiovascular and metabolic health in overweight patients. Independently, consuming fatty acids from fish or fish-oil, or regular exercise can both improve health, but combining these lifestyle modifications may be more effective than either treatment alone. (Medscape).

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Lack of sunshine vitamin may cloud survival odds.

New research linking low vitamin D levels with deaths from heart disease and other causes bolsters mounting evidence about the "sunshine" vitamin's role in good health. Patients with the lowest blood levels of vitamin D were about twice as likely to die from any cause in the next eight years than those with the highest levels. Vitamin D is naturally created by the body when exposed to sunlight, or is available as additives to such items as Calcium supplements and milk, as well as in many fish liver oils. Further, it is well known that vitamin D greatly enhances the absorption of Calcium by the bloodstream. (Archives of Internal Medicine)

Imported counterfeit drugs on the rise.

According to the Pharmaceutical Security Institute, an international not-for-profit corporation dedicated to improving prescription drug security, the number of counterfeit drugs seized in 2007 increased by 24%. This included illicit versions of 403 different prescription drugs from 99 countries. Among the most popular

copied drugs is Viagra, but hundreds of other popular drugs were also found to be counterfeit. Counterfeits often find their way into this country thru internet and mail-order suppliers. The illegally produced counterfeits are often worthless look-alikes, and sometimes dangerous substitutions or overdoses. (U.S. Pharmacist e-CONNECT)

FDA warns against fake cancer cures.

The FDA sent warning letters to 23 U.S. companies and two foreign individuals marketing a wide range of products fraudulently claiming to prevent and cure cancer. The FDA is also warning consumers not to purchase these products, which include tablets, teas, tonics, black salves, and creams sold under various brand names, containing ingredients such as bloodroot, shark cartilage, coral calcium, cesium, ellagic acid, Cat's Claw, an herbal tea called Essiac, and various mushroom varieties. Though promotions of bogus cancer "cures" have long been a problem, the internet has provided a mechanism for them to flourish. The warning letters are an important step to ensure that consumers do not become the victims of false "cures" that may cause greater harm to their health, and delay or prevent them from seeking valid medical treatment. (United Press International)

Drug may be the first to treat the common cold.

Researchers at St. Louis University say they have discovered that a smallpox drug might also target the adenovirus, which not only causes the common cold, but also several severe upper-respiratory infections. There are currently no drugs to treat adenovirus infections in large part because there has been no animal model in which to test drug candidates, a key prerequisite before testing in humans. Now the SLU scientists report two breakthrough findings: an animal model suitable for testing (in this case using Syrian hamsters), and a drug that successfully attacks the adenovirus in the animals. The scientists said their findings might lead to the first human testing of a drug to specifically treat adenovirus infections. (United Press International)

Estrogen linked to benign breast lumps.

One type of hormone therapy after menopause, estrogen plus progestin, is already well-known to increase the risk of breast cancer. But a major study of women able to use estrogen alone (those who have undergone hysterectomies) didn't find that link. New research however, finds that those estrogen-only users doubled their chance of getting non-cancerous breast lumps. That's a concern not only because of the extra biopsies and worry those lumps cause, but because a particular type – called benign proliferative breast disease – is suspected of being a first step toward developing cancer 10 years or so later. Even though the lumps usually turn out to be benign, microscopic examinations find that there are different types, from simple fluid-filled cysts to what's known as

proliferative breast disease because it's made of growing cells. Women in the tests are still being tracked, allowing scientists to eventually tell if the benign breast problems were a signal of trouble to come. (Associated Press)

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Flu Vaccine Update. Timely Warning From Down Under.

Flu vaccination this year will be especially critical due to reports of an alarming jump of 30% in flu cases in Australia, where doctors fear the worst is yet to come. Health services have issued an urgent "get vaccinated" warning; with the new 3 strain vaccine now available here thanks to the early warning from Australia. Last year's vaccine did not cover all the flu strains that developed, leading to many cases of flu in some who had been vaccinated. In keeping with our mission of maintaining the health of our patients, M.D. Pharmacy will be hosting the administration of flu shots on Tuesday, October 14th, from 10:00 AM until 2:00 PM at the pharmacy. Please call for particulars, 314-991-1111. This is critical for patients at high risk, the elderly, and very young.

Drug May Halt Alzheimer's Disease Progress.

Test patients in Scotland who took the new medication showed an 81% reduction in cognitive decline in one year. The researchers developed a novel treatment based on a new approach that targets the tangles (bunches of abnormal fibers of protein forming in nerve cells in the brain). They also found the drug had it biggest effect in the memory-critical parts of the brain where the tangle density is highest. This result demonstrates for the first time that it may be possible to arrest the progression of Alzheimer's. If Phase 3 findings confirm the Phase 2 findings, the drug may be available by 2012. (Elink)

Federal Government Surprised... We're Not.

The House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform released a report that found the Medicare Part D drug benefit in its first two years has paid about 30% more for prescriptions than Medicaid would have paid for the same medicines, costing the program about \$3.7 Billion. (Source: Kaiser Family Foundation, NCPA)

This writer is not surprised that Medicaid (a single-payer government program) which is not administered by any private 3rd party pharmacy benefit managers, would have saved the government roughly the same amount of money that the private insurance companies kept as "administrative costs" and record breaking profits for "managing" the pharmacy benefit program.

Erectile Dysfunction Drugs Boost Chemotherapy For Brain Tumors.

Researchers at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center said Viagra (sildenafil) and Levitra (vardenafil) are known to block an enzyme that interrupts a series of biochemical events that cause the decreased blood flow of erectile dysfunction. A laboratory study published in the journal Brain Research found that similar biochemical reactions in the small vessels of the brain play a major role in the blood-brain tumor barrier, which impedes delivery of anti-tumor drugs into brain tumors. The drugs (known as PDE5 inhibitors) were found to open the barrier and increase drug transport in early animal studies. This is the first study to show that oral administration of a drug improves the effectiveness of certain anti-tumor drugs. (Source: UPI/Yellowbrix)

Vitamin D Deficiency Common With Chronic Migraine.

New research showing that vitamin D deficiency is common in patients with chronic migraine suggests that this patient group, like other vitamin D-deficient populations is at increase risk for cardiovascular disease, malignancy, and other serious illnesses that have been linked to low levels of D, the "good health" vitamin. Dr. Steve Wheeler MD, from the Ryan Wheeler Headache Treatment Center said "As far as I am aware, no one has looked at vitamin D deficiency in migraineurs before. (Medscape)

Beware The "Free" Missouri Drug Discount Card.

In yet the latest of egregious practices of the greedy insurance companies, Restat (a PBM) has come up with a new twist to lure more profits into their treasury at the consumer's expense. To lend credence to this very questionable plan, it has unfortunately even been the subject of a front page article in the once-respected St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Call us for information about this bogus "free" plan before you find yourself paying \$4 to \$4.50 more in Restat's "administrative fees" for your prescription.

The pharmacists and staff at M.D. Pharmacy, your neighborhood pharmacy.

October, 2008

October, edition of M.D. Pharmacy's monthly newsletter. Articles regarding your medications, their safety, and the politics behind the price you pay for them. Please share this with your neighbors.

Measles Cases Highest Since 1996.

Some parents' refusal to vaccinate children seems to be behind the highest rate of measles cases reported since 1996, federal officials said. "Many cases are in children who are eligible for vaccination but who have not been immunized because of parents' decisions" said the director of CDC's Center for Immunization and Respiratory diseases. Each year some cases of measles have been imported from other countries, but because of extensive vaccinations in the U.S. the disease was not able to spread. This year, due to a lower degree of immunity the disease has been reported in 131 cases in just the first seven months. Before the measles vaccine became available in the mid-1960's the disease caused an estimated 3 to 4 million cases annually, resulting in 450 deaths and 4,000 cases of measles encephalitis, some 1000 of which resulted in chronic disability each year. In a separate study at Columbia University the measles vaccine has NOT been shown raise the risk of autism, hoping to dispel the long-running concerns of some parents. The disease was declared eliminated from the United States in 2000, but still occurs in 20 million cases globally. Very high levels of population immunity (95%) are needed to prevent the spread of the extremely contagious virus. In a room of 100 people, only 1 person having the virus will infect another 90 to 95 people. (iVillage Health)

Study Shows Expensive Ads Sell Few Prescription Drugs.

Those expensive "direct to consumer" TV and newspaper ads do little to encourage sales. They do of course, affect the costs of marketing by Big Pharma, which is then passed on to the consumer. Drug companies spent an estimated \$3 Billion in 2005 on such ads in the United States. Most countries ban direct advertising of prescription drugs, with the exceptions of the United States and New Zealand. (Reuters).

New Screening Catches More Breast Cancers.

A screening technique known as molecular breast imaging (MBI) detected three times as many breast cancers in women who have dense breasts and who are at a higher risk of developing the disease. Some 184,000 new cases of breast cancer will be diagnosed in the U.S. in 2008, and about 41,000 women will die of the disease. In the study, MBI detected 10 of 13 cancers among 375 patients, while mammography detected only 3. But while relatively inexpensive and easy to use, MBI is not yet widely available. (NBC/iVillage)

CDC Campaign Targets MRSA.

A national campaign to teach parents how to protect kids from skin infections caused by dangerous methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) was recently begun. MRSA, a type of staph bacteria that is resistant to most antibiotics, can cause severe infections, mostly in people in hospitals, but also in healthy people who haven't recently been hospitalized. MRSA is spread through direct contact with an infection, sharing personal items such as towels or razors that have touched infected skin, or by touching surfaces contaminated by MRSA. Signs and symptoms include a bump or infected area on the skin that may be red, swollen painful, warm to the touch, or contain pus or other drainage. Fever may be another symptom. Parents need to help children keep their cuts and scrapes clean and covered with a bandage, and encourage children to have good hand washing and general hygiene habits. In some areas of the U.S. MRSA accounts for over 6 million doctor's visits yearly. (CDC)

2nd Drug May Help In Low-Dose Aspirin Regimen.

Good medicine and cheap medicine don't always show up in the same pills, but here are two that do. For years, doctors have recommended a daily. Low-dose (children's) aspirin for people at risk of coronary heart disease, but while effective and cheap, it can also cause upper G-I bleeding. This bleeding carries a small risk of death. Another class of drugs called proton pump inhibitors (PPI's) can lessen the possibility of bleeding from aspirin, and one such drug is available generically and without a prescription. Adding a PPI to aspirin reduced the risk of G-I bleeding lifetime from 9 percent to 3 percent, and related deaths from 1.4 percent to 0.4 percent. (Archives of Internal Medicine/Philadelphia Inquirer)

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November, 2008

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Articles regarding your medications, their safety, and the politics behind the price you pay for them. Please share this with your neighbors.***

Long-Term Combination Alzheimer's Therapy Slows Decline.

Researchers at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston have found that long-term combination therapy with memantine (Namenda) and cholinesterase inhibitors (ex. Aricept) significantly slows the rate of cognitive and functional decline in patients with Alzheimer's disease (AD). Based on the results of the first long-term real-world study of AD drugs researchers now believe that combination therapy should be strongly considered for first-line treatment in patients with AD. The previous myth that has developed, that AD drugs only work for some people,

and that if patients responded early, they did not respond later, was based on very short-term studies, and is not backed up by any reliable data. (Medscape)

Cervical Cancer Shot Gains Acceptance.

The relatively new Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine is effective against certain types of a virus which infects the skin and mucous membranes, and which is responsible for causing almost all cases of cervical cancer in women. The new vaccine (Gardasil), which is administered in a three-dose series has been shown to prevent nearly all cases of cervical cancer, the second leading cause of death from cancer in women worldwide. Both men and women can be HPV carriers, and recently ear-nose-and throat doctors have found cases of HPV induced cancers in the mouths and back of the tongues in many males. Studies are being conducted to determine the efficacy of vaccinating boys with Gardasil. One in four teenage girls has received at least one dose of the vaccine. Proponents had hoped for a higher rate, but experts have said that 25% coverage for a new vaccine "is really very good". (United Press International)

Single Mammography Reading With Computer-Aided Detection is Viable Alternative to Double Reading.

Previous studies have shown that double reading of mammograms can improve breast cancer detection, and has become standard procedure in many European countries. However, a study in the current issue of New England Journal of Medicine found that a single reading with computer-aided detection is equally effective in screening. In addition, computer-aided detection can improve the rate of identifying malignant lesions in mammograms read by a single reader. Double reading, which is recognized as the best method for the detection of small invasive cancers, is often difficult to put into practice because of the cost and the need for two readers. (New England Journal of Medicine)

FDA Considers Limits on Kids' Cough Medicine.

Consumer and medical groups have called on the FDA to pull children's cough and cold medicines off the market, or make them available only by prescription. Last summer, FDA warned consumers not to give cold medicines to children under age 2 because of serious and possible life-threatening side effects. Most available cold remedies use combinations of different active ingredients, and most have not been well-tested in young children, said critics. At the same time, about 7,000 children under 11 go to emergency rooms each year after taking cough and cold medicines not prescribed by physicians or recommended by pharmacists. Roughly two-thirds of those occurred after children drank medication while unsupervised. Available data show cough and cold products to be ineffective for children with cough and cold symptoms, which usually clear up on their own without medicine, so any risk associated with these products is unacceptable. (FDA Public Health Advisory)

Cell Protein Suppresses Pain Better Than Morphine.

A cell protein used as a test for prostate cancer appears to also work as a pain medication that is far more effective than morphine, lasts up to 3 days (as opposed to 5 hours for morphine), but has far fewer side effects. Researchers found that Prostatic Acid Phosphatase (PAP) was identical to another protein found on pain-sensing neurons that converts the chemical messengers that cause pain into ones that suppress it. The researchers are now checking to see if other proteins work similarly, and are trying to create molecules that will enhance or mimic the action of PAP. (Health Day News)

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December, 2008

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Obama Wins: What It Means for Healthcare.

The recent election of Democrat Barack Obama ushers in a news administration that is all but certain to include some level of health care reform. Less clear is how extensive that reform will be, and when it will come. The President-elect has proposed sweeping changes in the system to provide health coverage to millions of uninsured Americans, but experts feel that the current financial crisis makes sweeping change unlikely at any time soon. During the campaign, Mr. Obama spoke of his mother's final days, spent battling insurance company bureaucrats who did not want to pay for her cancer treatments. This initial understanding of the insurance companies' complicity in the suffering faced by people in need of expensive healthcare bodes well for any future government action that may help to remedy the situation. Last December, Democrats in Congress lost a yearlong fight to boost federal spending that would have expanded healthcare programs after two separate vetoes by President Bush. At this time, we can only wish for the new President and his healthcare advisers, good luck, inordinate wisdom, and Godspeed.

Honey More Effective than Honey-Flavored Medication for Children's Coughs.

A study published in Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine found that children that received a single dose of buckwheat honey 30 minutes before bedtime slept better and coughed less than those who received honey-flavored dextromethorphan or no treatment at all. Dextromethorphan (The "DM" in

Robitussin DM) has been used for years as a cough suppressant, but recent voluntary relabeling of over the counter cough syrups have left virtually nothing for pharmacists to recommend for children under 4 years of age. In random double-blind studies, parents of children in the test reported the honey-treated group fared significantly better than those treated with dextromethorphan or nothing. An important caution: Honey should never be given to children under one year of age because honey can contain botulism spores in its natural form. (Pharmacist.com)

Wider Use of Cholesterol Drug May Save Lives.

A large study of the cholesterol-lowering statin drug Crestor has surprisingly shown benefits even in people with low cholesterol and no big risk for heart disease. The study showed dramatically lower rates of heart attacks, death and stroke when Crestor was taken by the study group. The results of the test were hailed as a watershed event in heart disease prevention. Doctors said the study might lead to as many as 7million more Americans to consider taking statin drugs, sold as Crestor, Lipitor, Zocor, and also available as much less expensive generic statins. As a group, statins are the world's top-selling drugs, but until this study, all but Crestor have already been shown to cut the risk of heart attacks and death in people with high levels of LDL, the bad cholesterol. But half of all heart attacks occur in people with normal or low cholesterol, so doctors have been testing other ways to predict who is at risk, such as a test for C-reactive protein (CRP), a measure of inflammation which could indicate clogged arteries. The study was a double-blind placebo controlled trial, using a placebo versus the strongest statin on the market, Crestor, but as a caveat, the study was sponsored by Astra-Zeneca, the makers of Crestor. (New England Journal of Medicine)

Are Online Drugstores Reliable?

If the price is too good to be real, the drug might be a fake! One patient reported ordering her Nexium (more than \$4 a capsule) from an online Canadian drugstore, but the capsules she received were manufactured in India, and they were generic. (Nexium is still under patent in the U.S.A.) "The medicine did not work, and now I have my asthma symptoms and cough back" said the patient. She had discovered one of the pitfalls of using an online pharmacy. Not all "Canadian" pharmacies are located in Canada. Many online drugstores source their medicines from around the world to get a better price, or what may well be a counterfeit. The FDA has no control over these medicines. (STLtoday.com)

Our wishes for a happy and healthy holiday season!

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