Pfizer – the price riser

In an extraordinary ruling issued as we go to press, the UK Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has handed out the largest fine in its history to pharma giant Pfizer for price-gouging a well-established epilepsy drug.

The CMA found that the company effectively deprived the NHS of £48 million through deliberate exploitation of the cost of phenytoin sodium.

Pfizer, along with UK-based distributor Flynn Pharma, were fined a total of £89.4 million after the CMA found that “each broke competition law by charging excessive and unfair prices in the UK for phenytoin sodium capsules”.

This latest scandal is sure to damage further the reputation of the pharmaceutical industry at a time when public and professional confidence in the sector is at an all-time low. Indeed, shadow health secretary Diane Abbott tweeted that it was “another example of how drug companies exploit our NHS”.

The CMA has four more ongoing investigations into the pharmaceutical sector and in February this year fined pharma companies a total of £45 million for anticompetitive agreements and conduct over the supply of paroxetine.

Pfizer intends to appeal this latest CMA ruling and claims that its deal with Flynn had “represented an opportunity to secure ongoing supply of an important medicine for patients with epilepsy”.

The company certainly faces an uphill struggle if it plans to persuade the British taxpayer that a 2600 per cent overnight price hike was motivated by altruism.

Statins – the debate rumbles on

Since an article published by the BMJ in 2013 questioned the efficacy of statins on lowering cardiovascular morbidity and mortality in low-risk patients, the debate on their routine use to prevent heart disease and strokes has become somewhat lively.1 Published online in Prescriber earlier this month (and appearing on p15 of this issue), an opinion piece by Dr Aseem Malhotra et al created a furor in the media that shows controversy on this topic remains far from over.

Responding to a recent study published in The Lancet, Malhotra et al questioned the integrity of research that claimed the benefits of statins far outweigh any side-effects. They noted that “only the drug companies, trialists and CTT have had access to the primary data”, which leaves medical authors to rely on unverified analyses of commercial trials.

Currently prescribed to an estimated eight million people in the UK, the need for objectivity on statins is vital. With uncertainty around the emergence of side-effects such as muscle weakness and soreness, alongside headlines exclaiming statins as “useless or harmful” treatments,2 or research as “fundamentally flawed”,3 the general public must clearly be confused. It is surely time for an independent review to examine the true benefits or otherwise of statins.

References

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