Drug designed to raise HDL levels falls down

On December 2, 2006, Pfizer halted the development of torcetrapib, the drug that was once considered by the company and pharmaceutical analysts as the most promising drug in its pipeline.

The development of torcetrapib as a treatment for heart disease was brought to an end because preliminary data from a 15,000-patient phase III clinical trial indicated that individuals receiving the drug had higher risks of death and heart failure than did individuals not receiving the drug.

The trial was organized such that 7,500 patients taking torcetrapib and the statin Lipitor (atorvastatin) were compared with 7,500 patients taking Lipitor alone. It was hoped that the drug combination would decrease the risk of coronary heart disease and stroke more than Lipitor alone. However, the independent panel of experts monitoring the trial noted that 82 patients receiving the drug combination had died compared with only 51 receiving Lipitor alone and advised Pfizer to halt the trial, which it did immediately.

The news came as a surprise to many people, including Jeffrey L. Kindler, the new chief executive officer of Pfizer, who only days earlier at a meeting for investors was quoted as saying, “This will be one of the most important compounds of our generation” (1). Similarly, Daniel J. Rader, which it did immediately.

As for Pfizer, analysts believe that the loss of torcetrapib from its pipeline is a major blow to the company, which was hoping that the combination of torcetrapib and Lipitor would extend the life of Lipitor past the expiry of its patent protection in 2011. Despite this, and the upcoming loss of patent protection on other high-income drugs such as Viagra, Kindler told the New York Times that the company still expected to report higher profits in both 2007 and 2008, mainly due to cost cutting (5).

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