



Letter to the editor: The Pundit Speaks  
By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.  
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## "Statin Pushers And The Public"

The huge pharmaceutical companies (Big Pharma) are incredibly adept with their "campaigns of persuasion" and the marketing of their frequently dubious products. One cholesterol-lowering drug, Lipitor, became the best-selling drug in the history of pharmaceuticals, even though it barely made it to the patient testing phase. Lipitor went on sale in 1997 and joined three blockbuster cholesterol-lowering (statin) drugs, which were making over \$1 billion annually. Lipitor gained a foot-hold and went on to sell more than \$125 billion over 14 1/2 years. Its sales were so meteoric that it was nicknamed "turbostain" by industry insiders and provided about 25% of the annual revenue of Pfizer Inc. The aggressive Lipitor sales teams utilized new standards for a marketing campaign. Family physicians and cardiologists were repeatedly visited and the public was smothered with advertising claims of the wondrous abilities of Lipitor at lowering cholesterol levels. Free samples were passed out like M&Ms and office staffs were wined and dined with free lunches. Skeptical doctors were assured that Lipitor's lowest dose worked as well as rivals' highest doses. Pfizer spent about one billion dollars of their money (and taxpayers money) for research studies to back their claims. Still, even with the competition from Zocor, Pravachol, Mevacor and Crestor, Lipitor became the only brand-name drug among the 20 most-dispensed drugs in the U.S, according to data from IMS Health. Nonetheless, Pfizer has struggled to develop another such blockbuster drug. Pfizer took a financial hit in 2007, when it had to abandon the wildly touted compound, torcetrapib, after spending about \$800 million in testing, but results showed that even though it raised HDL, it raised the risks of heart attacks and strokes. However, in 2012, Lipitor is about to be surpassed by its first generic rival. In June, Lipitor will be joined by multiple new generic versions, with one sold by Ranbaxy Laboratories and the authorized generic from Watson Pharmaceuticals Inc. In a counter move, Pfizer is offering patients and insurance plans, big discounts and rebates, including cards giving patients a \$4 monthly co-payment, if they stay on Lipitor. And Pfizer is promoting Lipitor in other foreign markets where their patent is still in effect and they are heavily promoting Lipitor in the emerging market in China. Yet, Pfizer sales peaked in 2009 at \$11 billion and the number of Lipitor prescriptions filled in the first full week after generics arrived, fell by about half.

In the America that I love, we will try to avoid being pawns of advertising campaigns of powerful drug companies. We realize that all drugs can have side effects and Lipitor is no exception, with type 2 diabetes now added to this list in older women. Always be careful.

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