

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Tamiflu Dangers”

This year marks one of the worst flu seasons in recent years. Tamiflu (oseltamivir), an anti-influenza medication, has been touted as effective in reducing complications of flu such as bronchitis and pneumonia. Sales of the drug skyrocketed during the hyped bird- and swine flu pandemics of 2006 and 2009. In 2009, sales of the blockbuster flu drug, Tamiflu, reached \$3 billion. But some of the evidence supporting its use has turned out to be based on fraudulent and/or missing data. In 2006, Dr. Tom Jefferson, was outraged when two employees of a communications company admitted that they had been paid to ghostwrite some of the studies, with explicit instructions to come to the "correct" conclusion regarding Tamiflu's effectiveness. According to the Los Angeles Times: **“After reanalyzing the raw data finally made available (they still don't have it all) ... there was no proof that Tamiflu reduced serious flu complications like pneumonia or death.”** Genentech Corp. is a U.S. affiliate of Hoffmann-La Roche that holds the marketing rights to Tamiflu. **Apparently, doctors prescribe it because they have nothing better, but without a lot of hope for good results.** The FDA continues to say they have never been provided data to support the claim that Tamiflu reduces serious flu complications or death, and the agency directed the company not to make such claims. Bizarre hallucinations, especially in children, may be a side effect of the anti-influenza drug, Tamiflu. Both the manufacturer of Tamiflu and the FDA say strange behavior can happen with the flu even when no medications are given. In all, the FDA has reported 559 cases of hallucinations from Tamiflu since 2009 and serious side effects are rare. However, over the past several years, a variety of reports of bizarre reactions have surfaced. The FDA website states, “Children and teenagers with the flu may be at a higher risk for seizures, confusion, or abnormal behavior early during their flu illness.” In 2005, more than 100 cases of hallucinations, delirium, confusion, and other strange behaviors were reported after children in Japan took the medication. Parents giving Tamiflu to their children are advised to closely watch them for any signs of behavioral changes or adverse reactions. Side effects of Tamiflu include convulsions, delirium and delusions. The death of five Japanese children and seven adults has been linked to the drug. Disturbingly, a 2009 study found more than half of all children taking Tamiflu experience side effects, including nausea, and neuropsychological effects such as altered behavior and nightmares. Other rare side effects such as toxic epidermal necrolysis and blindness have also been reported.

In the America that I love, during flu season, consult your local doctor, avoid crowds and wash your hands frequently.

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