

# Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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

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## “Tamiflu is Under Scrutiny”

Some flu products are questionable for effectiveness and possible harm. Such is the case for Tamiflu. The oseltamivir (Tamiflu, Roche/Genentech/Gilead) story has considerable missing information. In 2009, sales of the blockbuster flu drug, Tamiflu, reached \$3 billion. The European Medicines Agency had begun a so-called 'infringement proceeding' against the drug maker, Roche, for allegedly failing to properly report the side effects of 19 drugs being used by U.S. patients. Tamiflu was one of those drugs. British authorities noticed "serious shortcomings" in how Roche AG reported potential side effects of 80,000 consumers and of these, there were reports of over 15,000 deaths. Still, it was unclear if those deaths were caused by Roche medicines. The bitter fight over the flu drug, Tamiflu, has led to calls for a boycott of the Swiss drug maker's products and the campaign to force Roche's hand has been backed by the respected British Medical Journal. Some have decided that Tamiflu, as a flu-fighter, just isn't all that effective. Apparently, doctors prescribe it because they have nothing better, but without a lot of hope for good results. Yet, CDC director, Dr. Tom Frieden, recently issued a ringing endorsement of Tamiflu. The promotional campaign for Tamiflu states that high-risk groups should get to a doctor right away for prescription antiviral medication, since the drugs have been shown to reduce the risk of complications, such as pneumonia and respiratory failure. Despite CDC's enthusiastic promotion of oseltamivir/Tamiflu, 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. Moreover, the CDC, cites far less reliable observational studies to justify their claim that Tamiflu saves lives. Indeed, the CDC is pushing an off-label use of Tamiflu when it encourages doctors to prescribe Tamiflu or other flu antiviral drugs as a way to avert hospitalizations and death. That benefit, as the FDA has stated, has never been proven. And while it's legal for doctors to use drugs for off-label uses, it's illegal for manufacturers to do so. Remember the old adage, "Follow the money?" Jeanne Lenzer did so and found Roche had provided a directed donation to the CDC through the CDC Foundation for the Take 3 Tamiflu campaign. Lenzer also learned that the CDC Foundation provides an average of \$6.3 million in industry funding annually to the CDC. Still, researchers claimed they were in no way influenced by Roche funding. ”

In the America that I love, many do not trust some of the claims of the drug industry. Drug companies should be fully transparent with information concerning dangerous side effects or deaths from medications. Safety first.

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