

Prozac --- BMJ "news" in question

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Dispute Puts a Medical Journal Under Fire

by Barry Meier, 17 Jan 2005, New York Times

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Last year was an especially bad one for the pharmaceutical industry, which experienced controversies over how drug studies are disclosed and the implosion of the painkiller Vioxx. Now, as a result of the recent publication of an article about the antidepressant Prozac, it appears that the staid, usually methodical world of medical journals could suffer its own black eye.

On New Year's Day, the British medical journal BMJ published a news article suggesting that "missing" documents from a decade-old lawsuit indicated that Eli Lilly & Company, the maker of Prozac, had minimized data about the drug's risks of causing suicidal or violent behavior.

Within days, the article was cited in hundreds of television and newspaper reports. An outraged Washington lawmaker demanded to know if Lilly had hidden the information from the Food and Drug Administration. While company officials refuted the article's assertions, it was still repeatedly cited. And last Thursday, Lilly spent about \$800,000 to run full-page advertisements in 15 major publications to dispute the article.

The incident may prove to be a messy one for the BMJ, which is based in London and owned by the British Medical Association, a professional group. Much of the journal, formerly known as the British Medical Journal, is devoted to research reports about medical issues that are reviewed by experts. But the BMJ, like some other medical journals, also has a separate news section that prints articles like the recent one about Prozac. As it turns out, some of the Eli Lilly documents, which the BMJ said it received from an anonymous source, have been circulating for years. And, Lilly officials said, the BMJ and its reporter declined to provide the company with copies of the documents at issue prior to the article's publication.

The American freelance reporter who wrote the article, Jeanne Lenzer, declined to be interviewed, referring all questions to the BMJ. Officials there did not respond to written questions, but a spokeswoman, Emma Dickinson, said in an e-mail message on Friday that the publication "takes this issue very seriously" and will address Lilly's concerns after reviewing them...

The article's appearance follows the recent controversy over whether drug makers adequately disclosed the risks that antidepressants like Prozac posed to pediatric patients. And it comes as a South Carolina teenager faces trial for murder as an adult on charges that he killed his grandparents when he was 12. The teenager, Christopher Pittman, has acknowledged the crime, but his lawyers have based his defense on the argument that he became violent after taking the drug Zoloft, an antidepressant similar to Prozac...

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