

# NIH Cancels Meeting on Herpes

## Treatment Review Panel Faces Criticism Over Ties To Pharmaceutical Firms

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*January 19, 2007 1:29 a.m.; Page B2*

The National Institutes of Health abruptly canceled a meeting scheduled for next month to draft guidelines for treating pregnant women and babies with herpes, after concerns were raised about conflicts of interest among a panel of experts tapped to review the issue.

The action came after a group of physicians, medical researchers and consumer and health groups urged the NIH in a letter yesterday to bar experts who are paid by drug makers from helping to draft government guidelines for how doctors treat diseases. Their action was touched off by the NIH's recent naming of five experts to present evidence at a conference next month aimed at drafting guidelines for treating pregnant women with herpes and babies born with the condition.

The five experts, including one who is responsible for coordinating the writing of the guidelines, are doctors employed at academic medical centers. Four of the five experts, including the writing coordinator, have financial ties to makers of herpes drugs, resulting in a panel that "is completely unbalanced," the letter says. The five were the only experts listed as presenters on an NIH draft agenda for the meeting.

In an email, an NIH spokeswoman said the agency "has canceled the meeting out of concern that misperceptions about this meeting could not be resolved prior to the scheduled meeting date." She said no decision has been made on whether the meeting, originally slated for Feb. 20, will be rescheduled.

The action comes amid concern that clinical guidelines that form the basis for how physicians and hospitals treat patients are being unduly influenced by the drug industry. In several recent cases, including one

involving kidney treatment with the drug erythropoetin, guidelines composed by experts paid by drug companies have promoted treatment regimens that some other experts contended brought harm to patients while promoting wider use of a drug.

The letter was signed by 44 individuals and 16 organizations. Among the individuals were Richard Horton, editor of the British medical journal *Lancet*; Marcia Angell and Jerome Kassirer, both former editors of the *New England Journal of Medicine*; and doctors from medical schools including Harvard and Johns Hopkins. The organizations included the Center for Science and the Public Interest, the National Women's Health Network and the publisher of *Consumer Reports*.

The group wrote that the NIH agency "must be an honest broker in the development of medical evidence that will inform clinical practice" and that the NIH must ensure that all members of guideline-writing committees are "free from conflicts of interest."

As reported, several doctors who are paid consultants or speakers for **GlaxoSmithKline** PLC, maker of the best-selling herpes drug Valtrex, have traveled the country to promote testing and treatment of pregnant women with herpes as a way of preventing babies from picking up the infection. Newborn herpes, though rare, can be fatal. That treatment strategy, however, is controversial. Critics say that there isn't any evidence that treating pregnant women with herpes drugs will reduce cases of newborns born with the infection and that exposing as many as a million women a year to herpes medication could result in dangerous side effects for mother and baby.

The letter writers said the scheduled meeting on herpes added to a "sad record" at the NIH of drafting treatment guidelines using panels composed largely of experts receiving money from drug companies. They said that 2004 guidelines for treating cholesterol were drafted by a committee of nine physicians, eight of whom had financial relationships with makers of statins, which are widely given for high cholesterol.

According to a draft agenda of the Feb. 20 meeting, University of

Washington obstetrician Zane Brown was to have presented information on testing pregnant women for herpes. Dr. Brown is a frequent speaker for Glaxo on herpes issues. In an interview with The Wall Street Journal for a prior story on the subject, Dr. Brown estimated he gives two to three lectures a week advocating universal testing of pregnant women, earning \$1,000 to \$2,500 a talk.

The doctor who was slated to lead the session on writing the guidelines, Richard Whitley, is a pediatrician at the University of Alabama at Birmingham medical school who is a member of the Glaxo speakers bureau.

Also on the panel was Anna Wald, a University of Washington epidemiologist, who said yesterday she has been a consultant to Novartis AG, which makes a herpes drug, and has done research funded by Glaxo. Dr. Brown didn't respond to an email, and attempts to reach Dr. Whitley through a representative were unsuccessful.

The fourth member identified in the letter as having a conflict was Massachusetts General Hospital obstetrician Laura Riley, who is the secretary and treasurer of the American Herpes Foundation, a nonprofit largely funded by herpes drug makers. Dr. Riley says she has received a few \$1,000 stipends for attending meetings of the herpes foundation, but doesn't receive a salary or other pay for her work at the organization.

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