The Truth About Health

FOUL PLAY? FDA DRUG ADVISORY PANEL LARGELY COMPOSED OF THOSE IN THE PAY OF DRUG COMPANIES

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When it's time to approve or disapprove distribution of a particular drug, the FDA usually listens to its panels of industry advisors who vote in favor of or against individual drugs. The FDA selects committee members who are "screened for conflicts of interest according to the same strict ethics guidelines FDA applies to all its advisory committees." How thorough and effective is this screening?

When the FDAadvisory panel recently voted in favor of controversial painkillers Bextra®and Vioxx®(that was pulled from the market in 2004 by Merck, its manufacturer), ten of the 32 advisors had recent financial ties to manufacturers of these drugs or one of the same class. The three manufacturers are Pfizer (Bextra), Merck (Vioxx) and Novartis (a Swiss company applying to sell Prexige®, a drug in the same class).

For example, according to research recently completed by the Center for Science in the Public Interest, FDA advisor Robert Dworkin, Ph.D., received funds in the last year from both Pfizer and Novartis. Another advisor, John Cush, M.D., is currently a consultant for Pfizer. And so on down the list. To consider what effect these potential "hired guns" may have had on the questions whether or not to keep Bextra on the market and return Vioxx to the market, these ten members voted 9 to 1 in favor of both drugs. The rest of the panel voted 12 to 8 against Bextra and 14 to 8 againstVioxx.

In 2004, Merck removed Vioxx from the market after reports showed that it doubled the risk of death from heart attack, especially among those taking it for 18 months or more.

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