

The Truth  *About Health*

PFIZER PLEADS GUILTY TO PROMOTING DRUG FOR UNAUTHORIZED USES

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Pharmaceutical giant, Pfizer Inc., plead guilty to criminal charges for illegally marketing an epilepsy drug for unapproved uses, such as migraines, pain, and bipolar disorder.

According to U.S. prosecutors, Pfizer agreed to pay a \$430 million settlement, the second largest criminal fine for a healthcare fraud case.

The Warner-Lambert division of Pfizer promoted the drug Neurontin ® for uses in which there was no scientific evidence to support and in cases where Neurontin was shown to be ineffective.

“Warner-Lambert’s promotional efforts were a highly organized and deliberate attempt to circumvent federal restrictions on marketing,” said Associate Attorney General Robert McCallum.

The case originated from a lawsuit filed in 1996 by David Franklin, an employee of Warner-Lambert, before the acquisition of the company by Pfizer in 2000.

Franklin said the company used a variety of illegal schemes to increase sales of Neurontin, a drug that remains one of Pfizer’s biggest sellers, with sales reaching \$2.7 billion in 2003.

Franklin accused the company of hiring an outside firm to write at least 20 articles for medical journals that praised unauthorized uses of Neurontin and then paid doctors for use of their names as authors of the reports.

Salespersons were trained to exaggerate unauthorized uses of Neurontin. One senior company official said, “We need to be holding doctor’s hands and whispering in their ear, ‘Neurontin for pain, Neurontin for bipolar, Neurontin for everything’,” according to court documents.

Under federal regulations, companies may market and promote drugs only for uses approved by the Food and Drug Administration, although doctors can prescribe drugs to treat other uses.

Despite the severity of the settlement, it won’t financially impact Pfizer. The company had set aside \$430 million for the settlement. Pfizer’s sales for 2003 reached \$45 billion.

SOURCE: Reuters, May 13, 2004.