Consumers Union Issues Its First Guide on Drug Cost Effectiveness

BY ALICIA AULT  Contributing Writer

WASHINGTON — The nonprofit Consumers Union has issued the first in a series of evidence-based, patient-friendly reports listing what it calls the most cost-effective drugs, organization officials announced at a press conference.

The initial guides cover nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory agents (NSAIDs), statins, and proton pump inhibitors (PPIs).

The publisher of Consumer Reports said it hopes that patients—especially those who have little or no drug benefit coverage—will use these reports to make informed choices with their physicians.

The reports are designed to cut through the clutter of drug company advertising and scattered Internet searches.

But drug makers will not be allowed to use the “Best Buy Drugs” designation in marketing or ads: Consumers Union prohibits manufacturers from commercializing any of its recommendations.

The guides should be familiar to anyone who has used Consumer Reports’ ratings to buy a car, appliance, or bicycle. But unlike the group’s analyses on other consumer goods, the Best Buy Drugs reports are free of charge.

“In each category, based on all the evidence, we’ve identified Best Buy Drugs—the drugs that are likely to be the best, most affordable choices for most people,” said Joel Gunn, executive vice president of Consumers Union.

The Best Buy Drugs are not selected based on Consumers Union’s own tests, however, but rather on systematic reviews conducted by the Drug Effectiveness Review Project (DERP), and on further peer review from medical experts like Mark Helfand, M.D., who serves as director of the Oregon evidence-based practice center at Oregon Health and Science University, Portland, which initiated DERP in 2001.

DERP follows the literature review and analysis methods pioneered by the Cochrane Collaboration. That lends the Consumers Union’s reports credibility, said Peter Toth, M.D., who is director of cardiovascular disease prevention at Sterling Rock Falls Clinic in Sterling, Ill.

“I believe patients will find it to be a valuable resource when trying to balance cost with clinical efficacy,” Dr. Toth said.

Funded by 12 states, DERP has completed reports on 12 therapeutic categories. Consumers Union is making the first three available on a new Web site (www.CRBBestBuyDrugs.org).

The organization has said that it will add three more categories over the next few months—selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, β-blockers, and ACE inhibitors—and will continue to do so on a monthly basis.

Each report, which is also available in print form, offers a chart comparing the average monthly price for every drug—brand-name, generic, and over-the-counter—available in the class, at each dosage.

Price data are purchased from NDIC/Health, a company that processes pharmacy transactions, and those data reflect national retail averages. Consumers may be able to find even better prices by shopping around, said Gail Shearer, director of health policy analysis for Consumers Union.

In the statin category, the report recommends generic lovastatin as its Best Buy Drug for reducing low-density lipoprotein (LDL) by less than 40%.

Lovastatin costs an average $28 per month for 10 mg and $40 for 20 mg, according to Consumers Union. Lipitor (atorvastatin), at an average $117 per month, is the Best Buy Drug for LDL reduction of more than 40%.

A large group of Crestor (rosuvastatin) offers better LDL reduction for the price, it is not recommended because it has not been proven to reduce heart attacks or death, and safety studies are still being conducted, the report said.

Patients without drug coverage could consider over-the-counter NSAIDs, but only for periodic—not chronic—use, the report said.

The evidence shows that the COX-2 inhibitors Celebrex (celecoxib) and Bextra (valdecoxib) may cause fewer stomach ulcers, but it’s not clear yet whether they lower the risk of dangerous ulcers or serious gastrointestinal bleeding, and physicians may be more cautious about prescribing these therapies in the wake of Vioxx’s recall.

With issues such as the worldwide recall of Vioxx popping up periodically, the Consumers Union aims to constantly monitor safety, effectiveness, and pricing changes, Ms. Shearer said.

DERP plans 23 reports in all, and will update its reports every 6 months. The Best Buy Drugs project is funded partly by grants from the Engberg Foundation, and from the National Library of Medicine.

PAIN RELIEVERS

“Theres nothing physically wrong. It needs a psychiatrist.”

DR. TOTH

‘Patients will find it to be a valuable resource when trying to balance cost with clinical efficacy.’

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