Wyllie Loses Prempro Suit

A Pennsylvania jury has found that the hormone therapy Prempro was a cause of a woman’s breast cancer in the case of Jennie Nelson v. Wyeth. At press time, the liability phase of the trial was set to begin, and Wyeth will determine whether Wyeth is liable and is required to pay $15.5 million in compensatory damages. The jury will also decide whether punitive damages should be handed to the plaintiff Wyeth officials plan to argue that they “acted responsibly” by performing and supporting studies that evaluated the benefits and risks of hormone therapy according to a company statement. Wyeth officials also disagreed with the jury’s conclusion that Prempro caused the plaintiff’s breast cancer, saying there was no scientific basis for that finding. The decision comes on the heels of a September Wyeth victory in a federal case alleging that the Premarin and Prempro products had caused the plaintiff’s breast cancer. In the case of Linda Rervo v. Wyeth, the jury said that the plaintiff had not proved that the combination of Premarin and Prempro inadequately warned patients of the known risks of hormone therapy treatment.

Teen Abortion Restriction Stalled

Abortion rights advocates are claiming victory after attempts to bring up the Child Interstate Abortion Notification Act were stopped in the Senate. The lack of votes means that the measure was too controversial for a vote.

AIDS Treatment Wait Lists Persist

State AIDS Drug Assistance Programs continue to struggle to keep up with demand, according to the October report of the National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors. As of September 2006, 302 individuals were on waiting lists for HIV treatment in six states. AIDS Drug Assistance Programs (ADAPs) around the country serve individuals with HIV/AIDS who are low-income, uninsured, and underinsured. Three states have also implemented cost-containment measures such as offering a reduced formulary or imposing an annual per capita expenditure limit. Increased funding is needed to meet demand, according to Julie Swofford, executive director of the National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors, commenting that $1 billion is needed more than the fiscal year 2006 funding levels. “Without a permanent commitment to stable, predictable funding at levels that keep pace with demand, waiting lists will soon become a permanent feature of ADAPs,” she said in a statement.

Supplement Use Undisclosed

More than one-fifth of individuals taking prescription drugs also take a non-vitamin dietary supplement in the last year, according to a study published recently in the Archives of Internal Medicine. Overall, 60% of those who used both prescription drugs and supplements failed to tell a physician about their supplement use, the researchers found. The study is based on the 2002 National Health Interview Survey, which included 31,044 respondents. Of prescription medication users, the highest rates of supplement use were among menopausal women (33%), individuals with chronic gastrointestional disorders (28%), and individuals with severe headache or migraine (28%). Patients with heart failure, coronary heart disease, or a history of myocardial infarction were among those reporting the lowest rate of supplement use.

Coalition Seeks More FDA Funds

A coalition of strange bedfellows has joined together to call on Congress to increase funding for the Food and Drug Administration, saying that the agency’s mission and responsibilities have expanded greatly while its appropriations have failed to keep up with inflation or with the growing largess going to other agencies like the National Institutes of Health. That NIH investment is likely to result in a large number of new products, all of which the FDA will have to regulate, according to the Coalition for a Stronger FDA. The agency also needs help coping with growing pharmaceutical, medical device, and food safety issues, the group said. The coalition includes the Consumer Federation of America, the Center for Science in the Public Interest, the Grocery Manufacturers Association, the Biotechnology Industry Organization, and the Advanced Medical Technology Association, among others. Cochairing the coalition are the last three secretaries of Health and Human Services: Tommy G. Thompson, Donna E. Shalala, and Louis Sullivan.

Underage Binge Drinking Mapped

The highest rates of underage binge drinking in the United States occurred in the northeast region of North Dakota in 2002-2004, with the lowest rates reported in the District of Columbia’s Ward 7, according to a report from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Agency. The report, based on the results of the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, presented rates of binge drinking (consuming five or more drinks on the same occasion) in 340 substate areas among individuals aged 12-20 years. The lowest rate of binge drinking was 10% in the 12-17-year-old population. The highest rate was 36.1%, according to the SAMHSA report. The full report is available at www.samhsa.gov/environmental/underage_drinking.pdf.

Any changes in Medicare’s payment system would need to be approved by Congress. The panel’s report urged lawmakers to adopt an initial system that would reduce base Medicare payments across the board and use the money to fund rewards for strong performance. At the same time, Medicare officials would evaluate the program to make certain it is having the desired effect.

The proportion of Medicare payment withheld would be small at first, and providers would be compensated both for excellent work and for improving their performance, an area that encompasses care quality, efficiency, and “patient centeredness.” We are recommending a performance-based system in which both excellence and improvement are rewarded and significant improvement is rewarded,” Dr. Reischauer said. “Everyone can play and everyone can get back the money that was withheld initially from them.”

Many large health care providers and organizations already have the capacity to begin participating in a Medicare pay-for-performance system and should be required to do so as soon as it is launched, the IOM report said.