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Market Scan

FDA Looks Into Arthritis Drug, Cancer Link

Lisa LaMotta, 06.04.08, 2:40 PM ET

Drugs often do more than treat a certain condition. Sometimes they treat several and sometimes they even cause problems. In America, it is up to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to weed out the drugs that will do more harm than good. Often this is done prior to the approval process and these drugs don't ever make it to market, but occasionally it takes 10 years of data to realize there could be a problem.

The FDA said Wednesday that it is looking into a class of drugs called tumor necrosis factor blockers because of 30 reports over the last decade that the drugs could cause cancer in children and young adults.

The blockers treat various forms of arthritis including juvenile idiopathic arthritis and Crohn's disease. Four drugs currently on the U.S. market fit into this class of TNF blockers. They are: Enbrel--a combined effort by Wyeth and Amgen, Humira--by Abbott Laboratories, Remicade--manufactured by Schering-Plough, and Cimzia--by Belgian-based UCB.

"Amgen and Wyeth support the ongoing FDA review of safety information for TNF blockers and remain committed to providing FDA with any additional information needed," the companies said by e-mail.

The FDA said it was looking into these medicines because of 30 reports of lymphoma, leukemia, and other cancers in people who began taking the drugs when they were ages 18 or less. The reports span 10 years, from 1998 when the first of the drugs was approved to April 2008. Approximately half of the reports were lymphomas, cancer of the immune system cells, that were both Hodgkin's and non-Hodgkin's based.

All of the labels for the drugs currently address the possible risk of cancer when taking the drug. Yet, the FDA currently considers the benefits of these drugs to be greater than the harm that they could potentially cause.

An Abbott spokesperson told Forbes.com that the safety of Humira was reviewed in February, when it was approved to treat children with juvenile idiopathic arthritis and that there have been no instances of lymphoma in children taking Humira or in any of the clinical trials.