Gefitinib: shameless exploitation of cancer market

Patients with lung cancer, and their carers, are avidly awaiting a major breakthrough in the treatment of this grim and common malignancy.

Hopes have been raised by gefitinib (see pages 168-170), a drug with a novel mechanism of action that has been granted temporary approval in France. But on further scrutiny...

Preliminary trials reported promising results, but the protocols were not fully respected. Subsequent placebo-controlled trials showed no tangible clinical benefit.

Data on adverse effects have accumulated in the first countries to authorise gefitinib. More than 500 cases of interstitial pneumopathy have already been reported, many of which were fatal (one-third of cases in Japan, for example). Information is sparse, especially in countries where this drug has not been granted full authorisation but a more or less well-controlled regulatory status. As a result, it is difficult to determine the precise risk-benefit balance of gefitinib.

Yet sales continue to grow, in lung cancer and in other indications, despite the high price. Gefitinib costs about 2000 euros for 30 tablets.

Patients expect and are entitled to serious clinical evaluation of all new drugs, including those intended for use in life-threatening diseases. In the case of gefitinib, they are simply paying a high price for a drug about which there are more questions than answers. Just because a disease is life-threatening does not mean that candidate treatments can be marketed prematurely.

But, in the eyes of the pharmaceutical companies, cancer is a market like any other, and is to be shamelessly exploited.

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