Gefitinib: shameless exploitation of cancer market

Patients with lung cancer, and their car-
ers, are avidly awaiting a major break-
through in the treatment of this grim and common malignancy.

Hopes have been raised by gefitinib (see pages 168-170), a drug with a novel mech-
anism of action that has been granted tem-
porary 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 accumulat-
ed in the first countries to authorise gefi-
tinib. More than 500 cases of interstitial pneumopathy have already been report-
ed, 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 authorisa-
tion but a more or less well-controlled reg-
ulatory 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 seri-
ous clinical evaluation of all new drugs, including those intended for use in life-
threatening diseases. In the case of gefi-
tinib, they are simply paying a high price for a drug about which there are more ques-
tions than answers. Just because a disease is life-threatening does not mean that can-
didate treatments can be marketed pre-
matently.

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