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Editorial

COLLAPSE OF A CHOLESTEROL DRUG

The discovery that a promising experimental cholesterol drug can be deadly is a financial blow to the manufacturer and a sharp disappointment to doctors and patients who had been hoping for another breakthrough in the fight against heart disease. It is also a sobering reminder that pioneering drug research is a risky business both to patients who take unproven drugs in clinical trials and to companies that bet a good portion of their research budgets on them.

The drug in this case was torcetrapib, made by Pfizer, the world's largest drug maker. Pfizer had poured almost a billion dollars into developing the drug and had high hopes that it would rejuvenate the company's near-term financial prospects.

Unlike statins, which fight heart disease by lowering the amount of "bad" cholesterol in the blood, torcetrapib was the front-runner in a new class of drugs that try to raise the level of "good" cholesterol. It was precisely the kind of product we want the industry to focus on: not a "me too" drug that marks a merely incremental advance over some existing therapy but a wholly new approach that could spur a huge leap forward in the battle against heart disease.

Alas, in the late stages of clinical testing, an independent monitoring panel found that patients receiving torcetrapib were dying at a higher rate and had more heart problems than patients who did not receive the drug. The panel recommended terminating the trial, and Pfizer promptly did so. It was striking evidence of the importance of independent monitors, who can render a judgment based solely on patient safety without worrying about the financial implications for the manufacturer.

Torcetrapib was earlier found to raise blood pressure, always problematic for a heart patient. If that is what caused the increased mortality, then perhaps similar drugs that don't seem to raise blood pressure might work better. But if there is something intrinsically dangerous about raising good cholesterol, then the whole approach may need to be abandoned. That would be a shame. The drugs that reduce bad cholesterol have revolutionized cardiology but have still left heart disease the nation's No. 1 killer.