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HRT class action case on breast cancer OK'd

The Canadian Press Posted: Aug 5, 2011 4:28 PM ET | Last Updated: Aug 5, 2011 5:24 PM ET

A major drug company has lost its effort to derail a Canadian class-action lawsuit linking one of its hormone replacement drugs to higher rates of breast cancer.

A B.C. Supreme Court judge ruled the class action can be certified and women from British Columbia and other provinces can be represented.

The defendants are the makers of Premarin and Premplus, which are sold as prescription drugs for relief of symptoms of menopause, such as hot flashes and night sweats.

The central claimant in the case, Dianna Stanway of Sechelt, B.C., claims she took the drug for seven years before being diagnosed with breast cancer.

Stanway claims Wyeth Canada marketed its hormone replacement products for decades without proper safety research and that the drugmaker failed to adequately warn patients.

Lawyers for Wyeth originally tried to have the lawsuit blocked and when that failed, argued there were too many individual circumstances to allow the case to proceed as a class action, a claim the judge dismissed.

None of the accusations have been proven in court.

In a statement, Pfizer said hormone therapy remains an "important treatment option" for women suffering severe side effects of menopause.

"This procedural ruling is not a decision on the merits of the case, which the plaintiff ultimately must prove at trial," the company said.

"The company will vigorously defend this case, which still faces procedural challenges before it can go to trial."

The statement did not clarify whether that means Pfizer will appeal Thursday ruling and a company spokesman declined further comment.

The company maintains it acted responsibly by conducting more than 180 studies on hormone therapy's benefits and risks and that the labels on the medication accurately portray those.

"It is widely accepted that science cannot determine what caused or contributed to any individual woman's breast cancer except in rare circumstances where genetics play a role."

However, the lawsuit argues that the 2002 Women's Health Initiative Study by the United States National Institutes of Health concluded there was a connection between hormone therapy and an increase in breast cancer.



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After the study, use of the therapy plummeted and so did breast cancer rates, said David Klein, a lawyer representing the women.

Klein noted the company has been sued on similar grounds in the United States, leading to settlements in more than 3,300 cases.

Pfizer recently set aside \$772 million to resolve the remaining claims, he noted.

"The drug is the same, no matter which side of the border it is sold on. The harm is the same. It is time for the defendants to also compensate injured Canadian women."

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