

B.C. women file lawsuit over Pfizer quit-smoking drug

BY ANDY IVENS, VANCOUVER PROVINCE MARCH 11, 2010

VANCOUVER — Three B.C. women are suing pharmaceutical giant Pfizer over a lucrative drug that is designed to help people quit smoking but which, the plaintiffs claim, causes suicidal tendencies as an unintended byproduct.

In a writ filed last month in B.C. Supreme Court, the plaintiffs claim Pfizer Inc. and its Canadian subsidiary put profits from Champix ahead of public safety, ignoring research that showed the drug was dangerous to some people and dragging its feet in warning B.C. doctors who prescribe it.

Vancouver lawyer David Klein is seeking to have the lawsuit certified as a class action.

"It's a scary drug," Klein said Thursday.

"There is quite a bit of litigation now in the U.S. (over the same drug under a different name). There are hundreds of individual lawsuits that have been filed."

Klein noted Champix has helped "a significant number of people" quit smoking.

"The problem is that the harm caused to those who suffer the side effects is quite severe, and the warnings are inadequate."

He added, "It is a very profitable drug for Pfizer."

Under B.C.'s Class Proceedings Act, successful plaintiffs can be awarded the profits from a harmful product if the defendant is found negligent.

One of the three plaintiffs, Patricia Clow of Victoria, says her 22-year-old daughter Heidi's suicide last October happened as a result of taking Champix.

Heidi started taking Champix as directed last June, says the statement of claim.

Another plaintiff, Nicole McIvor of Princeton, B.C., began taking Champix in December 2007. A short while later she became depressed and contemplated suicide.

McIvor claims she attempted to commit suicide in May 2008 "by deliberately trying to smash . . . into an oncoming logging truck," says the writ.

The third plaintiff, Alicia Pickering of Sechelt, B.C., developed "a severe neuropsychiatric adverse reaction" after starting on Champix in June 2008.

"Deeply depressed and catatonic," Pickering has had to take a leave of absence from her job and was ultimately hospitalized, says the writ.

Champix was first approved in the U.S. in 2007 under the name "Chantix."

Unlike other smoking-cessation drugs, it inhibits nicotine receptors in the brain.

"It employs a somewhat novel mechanism of action," says the writ, by decreasing nicotine cravings and the psychological rewards or pleasure that smokers derive from smoking tobacco.

It is derived from cytosine, a smoking cessation drug that caused concern about elevated risks of suicide as far back as 1972 in Europe, says the writ.

"The risk of harm with this precursor drug (cytosine) should have alerted the defendants to the risk of harm from Champix," says the writ.

Pfizer has not yet filed a statement of defence, which is normal in the early stages of class actions, but Klein said he has been in contact with Pfizer's lawyers.

Pfizer has stated in the past it stands by its product.

"Champix is a proven prescription aid to smoking cessation treatment that has helped many adult smokers quit," Pfizer Canada Inc. said in a statement reported by CBC News.

"All medications have potential risks, and patients should consult with their doctors to determine what medications are right for them."

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