

B.C. court certifies breast cancer class action

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FIRST POSTED: FRIDAY, AUGUST 5, 2011 8:39:00 EDT AM

The B.C. Supreme Court has certified a class-action lawsuit on behalf of women who developed breast cancer after taking hormone replacement therapy.

The lawsuit alleges the makers of Premarin and Premplus, prescription drugs that treat hot flashes and other symptoms of menopause, failed to inform patients about research that demonstrates a link between hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and breast cancer, and even went so far as to hire ghostwriters to downplay those risks in medical journals.

Dianna Stanway of Sechelt, B.C., is the main plaintiff. She took Premarin for seven years, but stopped when she read news reports warning it could cause cancer. Two months after quitting, she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

"I never would have taken Premarin if I had been told of the risks. Fortunately, I won my battle with breast cancer. Not everyone is so lucky. I want my lawsuit to help all Canadian women, and their families, who have been harmed by this drug," Stanway said in a news release issued by her law firm, Klein Lyons.

But the defendant in the lawsuit, pharmaceutical company Wyeth, which has since been purchased by Pfizer, says there's no way to prove HRT gave Stanway cancer.

"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. Wyeth acted responsibly by conducting or supporting more than 180 studies on hormone therapy's benefits and risks, and including science-based information in Premarin and Premplus' labels that accurately communicate these benefits and risks to doctors and patients alike," Pfizer said in a statement.

Pfizer has already used that argument successfully. A jury in Charleston, West Virginia, recently ruled in favour of the pharmaceutical giant, saying there wasn't enough evidence to show HRT caused Leah Royce Hines's breast cancer.

But Pfizer has also lost battles in the many lawsuits it has faced, and still faces, over HRT.

In 2009, Donna Scroggin of Arkansas, who developed breast cancer after taking HRT, won \$29.5 million in a lawsuit against Wyeth.

The state of Nevada is currently involved in a lawsuit against Pfizer, alleging the company gave Nevada doctors deceptive information about the benefits of HRT.

"We look forward to bringing this case to trial. Many similar lawsuits have already been successfully tried to conclusion in the United States, resulting in repeated verdicts against the defendants," said David Klein, Stanway's lawyer.

Stanway's lawsuit alleges the company tried to cover up the risks associated with HRT by hiring people to write positive articles for scientific journals, a practice also alleged in a 2010 investigation published in the Public Library of Science's medical journal.

Adriane Fugh-Berman of Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., who was an expert witness in a U.S. lawsuit against Pfizer, told QMI Agency at the time that the company hired ghostwriters to pen articles to spin the benefits of HRT, and published them under the names of actual doctors.

Wyeth hired a company called DesignWrite to co-ordinate its communications strategy, said Fugh-Berman. DesignWrite recruited doctors to appear as authors, chose journals, and set about to "position the product appropriately to influence prescribers," she said.

Wyeth dismissed the allegations.

"This article completely -- and conveniently -- ignores the fact that the published manuscripts were subjected to rigorous peer review by outside experts on behalf of the medical journals that published them," the company said at the time.

Internal Pfizer documents made public during litigation revealed DesignWrite created over 50 peer-reviewed articles and over 50 scientific abstracts and posters, journal supplements, internal white papers and slide kits between 1997 and 2003, Fugh-Berman said.

In 2002, the Women's Health Initiative published a five-year study of 16,608 women ages 50 to 79, and concluded that HRT actually increases the risks of most of the things it claims to prevent, including heart disease, and greatly increases a woman's chances of developing breast cancer.

Compared to women who received placebo treatment, women who used HRT saw a 41% increase in strokes, a 22% increase in cardiovascular disease, a 29% increase in heart attacks, a 26% increase in breast cancer, and double the likelihood of blood clots.

Pfizer maintains, however, that "hormone therapy medicines are an important treatment option for many women with debilitating symptoms of menopause."