

January 24, 2008

## Heart Group Backs Drug Made by Ally

By [STEPHANIE SAUL](#)

After a study last week showed Vytorin, an expensive combination of two drugs for [cholesterol](#), worked no better than cheap [Zocor](#) alone in reducing artery plaque that can lead to heart attacks, the [American Heart Association](#) came to the drug's defense.

In a statement issued on Jan. 15, the day after the report's release, the heart association said the study was too limited to draw conclusions about Vytorin's ability to reduce heart attacks or deaths compared to Zocor alone. The group advised patients not to abruptly stop taking it without consulting their doctors.

What the association did not note in its statement, however, was that the group receives nearly \$2 million a year from Merck/Schering-Plough Pharmaceuticals, the joint venture that markets Vytorin.

Dr. Daniel W. Jones, the president of the American Heart Association, who was quoted in the Jan. 15 statement, said Wednesday that his group did not typically mention its drug company sponsors when issuing news releases with advice to patients.

The House Energy and Commerce Committee plans Thursday to send letters to the association and Merck/Schering-Plough asking about their relationship, a spokeswoman for the committee said. A letter will also be sent to the American College of Cardiology, a much smaller group, which also receives drug industry money and which also released a statement last week advising patients not to stop taking Vytorin without consulting their doctors.

Both organizations said Wednesday that the industry financing had nothing to do with their statements, which they said they issued in response to public confusion about the meaning of the Vytorin study. Merck/Schering-Plough also said it had played no role in the statements by the two groups.

The letters from the Energy and Commerce Committee are part of a broader committee investigation into the research and marketing of Vytorin.

Vytorin, which can sell for more than \$100 for a 30-day supply, combines the widely used cholesterol-lowering drug Zocor with another cholesterol-lowering drug, Zetia. Zocor alone is available in a generic form that can sell for less than \$6 for a 30-day supply.

The medical study, called Enhance, was the subject of a front-page article in The New York Times on Jan. 15. The article also reported that [Merck](#) and [Schering-Plough](#) were being criticized for not releasing results of the Enhance clinical trial sooner. The trial ended in April 2006.

The joint venture of the companies, formed in 2000, helps underwrite the budget of the American Heart

Association, and its nearly \$2 million a year in contributions includes \$350,000 to sponsor [a cholesterol page on the group's Web site](#), according to Dr. Rose Marie Robertson, the association's chief science officer.

Dr. [Sidney M. Wolfe](#), the head of the Public Citizen's Health Research Group, a consumer advocacy group, noted that the drug industry underwrites many professional medical organizations and said such funding raised questions about the groups' objectivity.

"The American Heart Association gets paid and essentially does the company's bidding," Dr. Wolfe said.

He also criticized the link between the American Heart Association Web site's "cholesterol" page and another [page](#): "Food & Family, the 2 sources of bad cholesterol." Only a reader who looks carefully realizes he has moved from a nonprofit site to the site of a corporate drug maker. Another click and the "Food & Family" page viewer is on the [Vytorin](#) Web site.

Both Dr. Jones and Dr. Robertson, who said the association's Web site was being changed Wednesday night to make the sponsorship clearer, said the organization strived for transparency on its Web page.

"We actually have a policy," Dr. Robertson said. "You've got to have two clicks before you get to any drug information."

Dr. Jones, who is also dean of the school of medicine at the [University of Mississippi](#) Medical Center, said: "We certainly don't want to ever give the impression that any content that's put in any place by a pharmaceutical company is delivered or endorsed by the A.H.A. If there is a lack of clarity on that, I will work with our team to make it clear."

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