

# Medical Briefs

*An abridged look at current events  
in and around the health-care industry*

## Kiss Cold Sores Goodbye

Health Canada has approved Valtrex® (valacyclovir hydrochloride) for the treatment of cold sores. According to a recent Canadian survey conducted by Ipsos Reid, 54% of cold sore sufferers say their infections have stopped them from kissing loved ones. In addition, results of the survey show that 55% of cold sore sufferers say their infections make them feel self-conscious, frustrated, and/or embarrassed.

**Implication:** It is estimated that 20% to 40% of the adult population suffer from cold sores. Valtrex is the first once-daily, oral antiviral medication indicated for the treatment of cold sores and has been shown to reduce the pain and duration when taken at the first tingle, itching, burning, or other early sign of an outbreak. Valtrex gives cold sore sufferers an option for treating their socially impacting infection.

Cold Sore Sufferers are Tight-Lipped When It Comes To Kissing. Press Release, Toronto, Ontario, May 22, 2003.

### This Month:

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## New Antidepressant Lowers Sexual Dysfunction Rate

Two new sets of data on duloxetine (proposed brand name Cymbalta™), a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) being studied for the treatment of depression, were recently released. The data show a significantly lower incidence of sexual dysfunction compared to patients taking Paxil™ (paroxetine). The data also show that patients taking duloxetine had significantly greater reduction in painful physical symptoms and higher remission rates compared to placebo. The investigational therapy has been submitted to Health Canada for approval of the drug.

**Implication:** Up to 73% of patients taking SSRIs may report sexual dysfunction. This side-effect is a major concern of people taking antidepressants. However, the new data show that even at the highest dose of duloxetine, the incidence of sexual dysfunction was significantly lower than at low doses of Paxil. The data further supports previous reports that combination norepinephrine and serotonin-acting antidepressants produce less sexual dysfunction than straight serotonin-acting agents.

Higher Rates of Remission and Lower Incidence of Sexual Dysfunction Demonstrated in Patients Taking Duloxetine. Press Release, Toronto, Ontario, May 21, 2003.

## Improving Compliance in Patients With Bipolar Disorder

New data presented at the American Psychiatric Association indicate that Seroquel<sup>®</sup> is effective, well-tolerated, and fast-acting when used as monotherapy for the treatment of mania associated with bipolar disorder. Bipolar disorder affects approximately 3% to 4% of the adult population and one of the issues faced by psychiatrists in treating this condition is patient compliance. This newest double blind, randomised trial included 604 patients experiencing manic episodes and taking either Seroquel or placebo. Patients in the Seroquel group were more likely to complete the trial than those in the placebo group.

**Implication:** Dr. Eduard Vieta, director of research, department of psychiatry at the University of Barcelona says, “The results are extremely promising. The improvements seen in patients taking Seroquel were not only rapid, but significant. These results show Seroquel should be considered a first line treatment [for bipolar disorder].”

New Data Show Seroquel To Be an Effective, Well-Tolerated and Fast-Acting Treatment for Mania in Bipolar Disorder. Press Release, Alderley Park, U.K., May 21, 2003.

## New Eczema Treatment is Steroid-Free

Elidel<sup>®</sup> (pimecrolimus) cream, 1%, a new nonsteroidal prescription cream for the treatment of eczema, has been approved by Health Canada for the short and intermittent long-term treatment of mild to moderate eczema in patients as young as two years old. Elidel can be used on all skin surfaces, including highly sensitive areas, and has significant advantages over conventional therapy in the long-term management of the disease.

**Implication:** Elidel is a major advance in the management of eczema,” say Dr. Alfred Balbul, assistant professor of dermatology at McGill University. “Ever since the introduction of topical corticosteroids over 50 years ago, physicians have been looking forward to an alternative approach that is effective, safe, and does not have corticosteroid-related side-effects, such as skin thickening.” Over the past 20 years, there has been a dramatic increase in the prevalence of eczema. In Canada, over 6 million people suffer from this chronic condition.

Health Canada Approves First-Ever Steroid-Free Cream for The Treatment of Eczema. Press Release, Montreal, Quebec, May 8, 2003.

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## Survey Shows Better Use of Asthma Medications

New data published by IMS Health show a 6% decline in the number of physician office visits for asthma in 2002. Similarly, the growth in the estimated number of prescriptions dispensed in Canadian pharmacies for bronchial therapy have slowed since 1999 and recorded a decrease of 1.3% in 2002 compared to 2001.

**Implication:** “We have very effective medications for treating asthma and the inadequate control of the disease is often due to inappropriate use of these medications,” says Dr. Catherine Lemière, respirologist and chair of the Asthma Committee of the Canadian Thoracic Society. “These results are very encouraging since they may be due, in part, to improved use of asthma medications. However, we must not stop there, as bronchodilators are still being overused and inhaled corticosteroids underused.”

Decline in Asthma Doctor Visits and Prescriptions. Press Release, Montreal, Quebec, May 15, 2003.

## New Twist on an Old Formula

Health Canada has approved Varivax<sup>®</sup> III (varicella virus vaccine), a third-generation version of Varivax<sup>®</sup>—the first vaccine indicated for immunization against chickenpox in healthy individuals 12 months of age and older. Varivax III prevents chickenpox with the same safety and efficacy as previous formulations; however, the new vaccine offers the added convenience of being refrigerator-stable for up to 18 months.

**Implication:** “Most people consider chickenpox a harmless disease. However, each year 350,000 Canadians will develop chickenpox and 1,900 of them will experience complications that require hospitalization,” says Dr. John F. Yaremko, pediatrician at the Montreal Children’s Hospital. “Vaccination against chickenpox is highly recommended since, in rare cases, it can lead to some very serious, even life-threatening complications, such as severe group A streptococcal infections.”

New Chickenpox Vaccine Formulation Approved by Health Canada. Press Release, Montreal, Quebec, May 14, 2003.

## A First in Type 2 Diabetes Treatment

Health Canada has approved Avandamet™ (rosiglitazone maleate and metformin HCl), the first combination therapy for the treatment of Type 2 diabetes. Combining complimentary treatments Avandia® (rosiglitazone maleate) and metformin in one tablet, Avandamet has been shown to provide superior long-term glyceemic control in patients with Type 2 diabetes.

**Implication:** “Several studies have demonstrated that monotherapy for the treatment of Type 2 diabetes results in inadequate control, particularly over the long-term. New combination medicines, such as Avandamet, may help patients achieve and maintain long-term glyceemic control more effectively,” says Dr. Bernard Zinman, professor of medicine at the University of Toronto. Achieving and maintaining glyceemic control are keys to preventing complications associated with diabetes.

First Combined Medication For Type 2 Diabetes Approved by Health Canada. Press Release, Toronto, Ontario, May 14, 2003.

## “Real World” Solutions for Schizophrenia

Six-month findings from the world’s largest observational schizophrenia study show that although patients treated with atypical antipsychotics experience marked improvement in their quality of life, various treatments differ in terms of effectiveness. People treated with Zyprexa® (olanzapine) had greater symptom improvement and social functioning than people treated with risperidone, quetiapine, oral typical, and depot typical antipsychotics. This study, The Schizophrenia Outpatients Health Outcomes (SOHO) study, is unprecedented in size and scope.

**Implication:** “SOHO has given us important information about the care we provide to people with schizophrenia and because the study was conducted in ‘real world’ settings it is more reflective of the true patient experience. This is real information about people living with and treated for schizophrenia,” says Dr. Marie-Josée Poulin, psychiatrist and professor at Université Laval.

Largest Ever International Schizophrenia Study Highlights Differences in Patient Outcomes. Press Release, Toronto, Ontario, May 20, 2003.

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## Another Option for COPD Patients

Advair<sup>®</sup>, 250 and 500 Diskus<sup>®</sup> (salmeterol/fluticasone), have been approved by Health Canada for the treatment of breathlessness and lung function in patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). A recent study showed that patients taking Advair experienced a 25% to 39% reduction in attacks of breathlessness, the most important trigger for COPD hospital admission. Clinical studies also show that Advair helps reduce the need for rescue medications and patients taking it experienced fewer nighttime awakenings.

**Implication:** “The goals of [COPD] management are to slow the progression of the disease, effectively diminish the symptoms that significantly impair a patient’s quality of life, and prevent hospitalizations. With the approval of Advair for COPD, physicians now have a new option in achieving these goals in patients who have already been treated with bronchodilators,” says Dr. Ronald Grossman, respirologist and chief of medicine at Credit Valley Hospital in Mississauga, Ontario.

New Treatment Option Approved For Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease. Press Release, Mississauga, Ontario, May 8, 2003.

## Combination Therapy for Low Testosterone

A Columbia Presbyterian Medical Centre study shows that for men with erectile dysfunction and low testosterone who do not respond to Viagra<sup>®</sup> (sildenafil) alone, the supplemental use of AndroGel<sup>®</sup> (testosterone gel) improves erectile dysfunction and overall sexual satisfaction.

**Implication:** “When assessing erectile dysfunction, doctors and patients should consider using a simple blood test to determine if low testosterone is a contributing factor. If the root cause is low testosterone, Viagra alone won’t fix the problem,” says Dr. Ridwan Shabsigh, associate professor of urology at Columbia University. It is estimated that 4 to 5 million American men have low testosterone. [Dx](#)

When Erection Pill Isn’t Enough. Press Release, Chicago, Illinois, April 29, 2003.

*In the May 2003 issue of The Canadian Journal of Diagnosis, Medical Briefs, page 111, the item entitled "Gleevec helps patients with newly diagnosed CML," states that the number of patients included in the IRIS study was 11,106. In fact, the IRIS study involved 1,106 patients. We apologize to our readers.*