

# Medical Briefs

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

## This Month:

1. Depression, sleeplessness, and anxiety
2. Osteoporosis in men
3. Keeping patients on their thyroid supplements
4. GERD and PPIs
5. First topical antiarthritic in Canada
6. Relief for COPD patients

## 1. Getting a Good Night's Sleep

Almost 3 million Canadians are depressed and possibly sleepless and anxious. Many of today's drugs do not treat these problems as effectively as they should. Remeron<sup>®</sup> (mirtazapine), a newer antidepressant, has established efficacy that appears to be useful in patients suffering from depression, as well as anxiety and sleeplessness. Also, it is safe and effective over long-term use.

**Implication:** Credited with being a "smart" drug, Remeron not only corrects the chemical imbalances in the brain, it has the unique ability to block two receptors, thus causing fewer serious side-effects (such as sexual dysfunction, nausea, diarrhea, nervousness, and insomnia) commonly seen with other antidepressants. Remeron takes the treatment of depression one step closer to being monotherapeutic.

Many of Canada's Depressed are Sleepless and Anxious: Experts. Press Release, Montreal, Quebec, June 20, 2003.

## 2. Men Suffer from Osteoporosis Too

Although an estimated 1.4 million Canadians suffer from osteoporosis, a new survey reveals that only 7% are aware of the actual number of males who suffer from this debilitating disease. While the survey showed that 70% of males recognize they can be affected by osteoporosis, they still do not realize the frequency with which they can be affected.

**Implication:** "The reality is that one in eight Canadian men are affected by osteoporosis and this figure is expected to grow rapidly as the population ages," says Charles Draper, executive director of Osteoporosis Quebec. "Osteoporosis in men is infrequently diagnosed and undertreated. Often, even after a fracture, osteoporosis is not suspected in men." Osteoporosis is known as the "silent thief" because a bone loss occurs without symptoms and the disease is often diagnosed only after a fracture occurs.

Canadians Need to "Bone Up" on Their Knowledge When it Comes to Men and Osteoporosis. Press Release, Montreal, Quebec, June 11, 2003.

## 3. Leaving Hypo-Hell Behind

Thyroid cancer recurs in 30% of patients, often with poor or fatal outcomes. Long-term followup testing for early detection of spreading cancer is vital for thyroid cancer patients. However, patients often mistakenly consider themselves “cured” or neglect this procedure. For years, thyroid cancer patients have avoided ongoing followup testing based on the debilitating side-effects of hypothyroidism, also called hypo-hell. The symptoms associated with hypo-hell are rapid weight gain, slow reflexes, cognitive problems, memory loss, depression, and unremitting fatigue. However, Health Canada recently approved Thyrogen™ (thyrotropin alfa for injection). This treatment allows patients to stay on their thyroid supplements throughout the course of testing.

**Implication:** According to Dr. Al Driedger, a nuclear physician at the London Health Sciences Centre in Ontario, Thyrogen is really a breakthrough tool in terms of screening thyroid cancer patients and encouraging them to return for important followup testing without the debilitating effects of hypothyroidism.

Better Testing for Fastest Growing Cancer in Canada. Press Release, Toronto, Ontario, June 3, 2003.

## 4. Are PPIs the Answer?

A survey released at the recent Digestive Disease Week congress found that out of 927 gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) patients, 91% felt that treatment improved their quality of life, but many said the condition still has a negative impact on their daily life. At the same congress, a study was released involving proton pump inhibitors (PPIs). In the study, patients with symptoms of GERD received the standard doses of five different PPI drugs over a five-day period. Treatment with Nexium® (esomeprazole magnesium) resulted in significantly greater suppression of gastric acid secretion than all other treatments.

**Implication:** “These results demonstrate unequivocally that standard-dose PPIs are not equally effective with regard to gastric acid suppression; these data provide sound pharmacodynamic basis for selecting the most effective PPI for patients who have acid-related symptoms,” comments Dr. David Armstrong, an investigator in the survey.

Patients Still Suffer from Acid-Related Symptoms Despite Taking Prescription Medication. Press Release, Montreal, Quebec, June 3, 2003.

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## 5. Topical Antiarthritic Now Available in Canada

Specialty pharmaceutical developer, Dimethaid Research Inc., has officially launched Pennsaid® (diclofenac), North America's first topical prescription antiarthritic. Pennsaid received final Health Canada approval on March 31 as a treatment for knee osteoarthritis.

**Implication:** Pennsaid delivers acute ingredients through the skin directly to the site of disease. It will be marketed as an alternative to oral antiarthritic medications, many of which have been linked to serious side-effects, including gastrointestinal bleeding and kidney and liver diseases. In Canada, as many as 1,900 deaths per year have been attributed to traditional oral medications commonly taken to relieve osteoarthritis symptoms.

Dimethaid Launches Pennsaid® Canada-wide. Press Release, Toronto, Ontario, May 29, 2003.

## 6. COPD Patients Can Breathe Easier

New data have demonstrated that Symbicort® (budesonide/eformoterol) significantly reduces the risk of having a chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) exacerbation, extending the time to a first exacerbation by 158 days more than placebo. These are the best results ever seen in clinical trials of patients with COPD. Symbicort also provides greater improvement in quality of life than what has been seen with long-acting bronchodilators or inhaled corticosteroids alone. Symbicort is the first drug to show such advantages.

**Implication:** "Preventing exacerbations that require urgent medical care has become a key goal of COPD management," says Dr. Ken Chapman, director of the Asthma Centre of the University Health Network and professor at the University of Toronto. "This study shows that Symbicort significantly reduces the risk of exacerbation, helping to keep patients out of the hospital and improving their quality of life." [Dx](#)

Symbicort® Extends Time to First COPD Exacerbation by 158 Days. Press Release, Montreal, Quebec, May 28, 2003.