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**By Michael Monheit, Esquire, Monheit Law, PC**

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Clinical trials showed heart bypass surgery patients taking Bextra, an anti-inflammatory in the same class as the recently withdrawn drug Vioxx, had a higher risk of stroke and heart attack.

It was already known that Bextra can cause a rare, but sometimes fatal, skin disorder called Stevens-Johnson syndrome to note that cases of the condition are being seen more often with Bextra than with other drugs in the same class. Warnings about this have been recently updated.

Bextra is approved to treat pain from arthritis and, like Merck & Co.'s Vioxx, is a COX-2 inhibitor. A recent trial showed Vioxx doubled the risk of heart attack and stroke in arthritis patients who took the drug for more than 18 months. This is significant because these patients are already at risk of stroke or heart attack. So a drug like Bextra could be very dangerous if Bextra increases and already higher than normal risk of stroke or heart attack.

The Vioxx withdrawal has cast a cloud over the entire class of COX-2 inhibitors, which includes Bextra, Celebrex and an experimental drug from Novartis AG called Prexige.

However, Pfizer said that following the Vioxx withdrawal it re-examined its clinical data base of 8,000 patients with rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis and found no increased risk of dangerous heart events in patients taking Bextra for up to a year. The company also found no increased risk in a trial of patients taking Bextra in a general surgery setting. Of course, check the source, as Cox-2 drugs like Bextra account for \$6 billion in sales per year!

Doctors said it is too early to quantify the potential risk of Bextra or of Pfizer's other COX-2 inhibitor Celebrex as neither have tested for long enough. Pfizer said it is conducting longer term trials in arthritis patients.

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The coronary bypass trials are ones that Dr. Eric Topol of the Cleveland Clinic Foundation and an early and outspoken critic of Vioxx, said he finds concerning as they show a cluster of heart attacks and strokes. But he said the danger signal does not appear to be as strong as it was with Vioxx.

"Celebrex and Bextra do appear safer than Vioxx but whether they are really safe, especially in patients with heart risk, that's an open question," Topol said.

Pfizer has updated the label on several occasions since it was approved in 2001 to reflect the risk of Stevens Johnson syndrome, a form of allergic reaction often caused by certain types of drug. Symptoms usually begin as a blistering of the mouth and lips, spreading to the throat, tongue and other parts of the body. The blisters sometimes become so extensive as to be fatal. The company also updated its warning that Bextra can cause a rare, but sometimes fatal, skin disorder called Stevens-Johnson syndrome to note that cases of the condition are being seen more often with Bextra

than with other drugs in the same class. Now the label should be updated to include information on stroke and heart attack risks from Bextra.

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Michael Monheit, Esquire is the managing attorney for Monheit Law, located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Monheit Law, P.C. concentrates its practice in the field of plaintiff personal injury cases on a contingency fee basis. They can be found at

### **Pfizer's Bextra Faces Its First Lawsuit**

#### **By Scott Montgomery**

For years, Merck has been under scrutiny for a number of drugs, most recently Vioxx. The recall of Vioxx has shares down by more than 40 percent and facing hundreds of lawsuits that could cost them billions of dollars. However, Merck is not alone in the scrutiny that this pharmaceutical company faces. Pfizer, the maker of Bextra and Celebrex, painkillers in the same family as Vioxx, is facing similar legal problems. The question being asked is whether Bextra and Celebrex increase the risk of heart attack and stroke.

Although Pfizer has avoided much of the negative publicity in newspapers and radio as compared to Merck, the question still stands as to whether the problems with Vioxx extend to similar medicines taken by millions of consumers. Although these pharmaceutical companies claim to have drugs that relieve chronic arthritis pain without causing ulcers, what other side effects may be the result?

Susan Raymond is filing a suit claiming her husband, age 46, died from a heart attack after taking Pfizer's Bextra for only 10 months. Jerrold Parker, an attorney at Parker & Waichman in Great Neck, N.Y. will be representing her.

Despite this incident, Pfizer challenges the negative effects that Bextra may have had, claiming that large, long-term studies demonstrate that although Bextra and Celebrex are in the same family of Cox-2 inhibitors, that they do not hold the same risk. Pfizer goes on to add that the two smaller studies that show risks associated with Bextra were limited to patients that had undergone open heart surgery and therefore, do not represent the risks to the average patient.

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At a major medical meeting, two leading researchers presented evidence that Bextra carries the same elevated risk of heart attack and stroke as other Cox-2 inhibitors. They criticized Pfizer for failing to notify the public of the scientific data relating to its risks. In turn, Pfizer said the findings were flawed. Although the effects of Bextra remain an immense debate, medical experts have and will continue to raise questions about the safety of Bextra and this class of medicines.

Scott Montgomery, who represents the Montgomery Law Firm, LLC, investigates cases dealing with Bextra and its harmful side effects to consumers. If you or a loved one has been injured by Bextra you may have valuable legal rights. We will evaluate your case for free.



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