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Afib Drug Tied to Reports of Liver Injury

Sanofi-aventis has alerted healthcare professionals to several reports of liver function test abnormalities and hepatocellular injury in patients treated with its atrial fibrillation drug dronedarone (Multaq), a company spokesperson confirmed.

The Dear Healthcare Provider letter included two post-marketing case reports of acute liver failure that required transplantation, occurring at four-and-a-half and six months after the start of dronedarone therapy.

The patients -- both female and about 70 years old -- had had normal hepatic serum enzymes before starting the drug.

"Because these reactions are reported voluntarily from a treatment population of unknown size, it is not always possible to reliably estimate their frequency or establish a causal relationship to drug exposure," noted an FDA announcement.

The agency advised patients to continue taking the drug unless otherwise instructed by their healthcare provider.

In the letter, sanofi-aventis instructed healthcare professionals to tell patients to immediately report any symptoms suggestive of hepatic injury. According to the FDA, these include anorexia, nausea, vomiting, fever, malaise, fatigue, right upper quadrant pain, jaundice, dark urine, or itching.

Patients should stop taking the drug in cases of suspected hepatic injury, the agency said.

Periodic liver enzyme tests, especially in the first six months of treatment, should also be considered, according to the FDA, although it is unknown whether such a strategy will prevent the development of liver injury.

Dronedarone's prescribing information will be updated to include the guidance from the Dear Physician letter, and will be distributed after the FDA approves it. The agency confirmed that a warning about potential liver injury will be added to the drug's label.

A spokesperson for sanofi-aventis said the company is also working with health authorities outside the U.S., including the European Medicines Agency.

According to the FDA, from the drug's approval in July 2009 through October 2010, about 492,000 prescriptions for dronedarone were dispensed and about 117,000 patients filled prescriptions at U.S. pharmacies.

The drug was approved with a Risk Evaluation and Mitigation Strategy to prevent use in patients with severe heart failure or in those with less severe heart failure who were recently hospitalized for the condition. Such patients had a doubling in the risk of death in a placebo-controlled study.