

## UK MDs oppose selling statins without prescription

Leading physicians are condemning the UK's decision to allow patients to buy a cholesterol-lowering statin drug without prescriptions as a colossal "experiment."

In May, the UK declassified Simvastatin (Zocor), a statin, as an over-the-counter pharmaceutical, following advice from its Committee on Safety of Medicines. The drug will be available without prescription in a 10-mg dose — half the usual prescribed dosage — beginning this summer.

Health Secretary John Reid says statins save lives, and this will extend access to a successful drug.

But some physicians and consumer groups say the dosage has no proven efficacy and the drug may pose dangers to some.

Dr. Ike Iheanacho, deputy editor of the *Drug and Therapeutics Bulletin*, says there's no clinical evidence the drug is effective at 10 mg and the over-the-counter strategy has never been tested. "The whole thing is an experiment ... with all the risks and limitations of experiments."

The British Medical Association (BMA) says the 10-mg dose may not be high enough to help people who really need it, and all statins carry the risk of side effects.

The move also means patients, not the government, will have to pay for the drug. "If a drug treatment is worth taking it should be provided equitably," says the BMA's Dr. John Chisholm.

The British Heart Foundation and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain support the reclassification.

The reclassification means the manufacturer can target a whole new market by advertising directly to consumers, says Iheanacho. "You can argue that it doesn't matter if it benefits industry as long as patients do well — but where is the evidence that patients will do well? Yet it is obvious that industry will do very well."

Johnson & Johnson-Merck Consumer Pharmaceuticals Company was formed as a joint venture to seek FDA approval for a low-dose, over-the-counter version of Merck's statin Mevacor. — *Colin Meek, Wester Ross, Scotland*

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### WOMEN'S HEALTH

## Manitoba refuses to fund abortions at clinic

The new owners of the Morgentaler abortion clinic in Winnipeg continue to be as frustrated as the clinic's founder in their attempts to get the Manitoba government to pay for abortions performed there.

The board of directors of Jane's Clinic Inc., a non-profit entity representing 18 women, purchased Dr. Henry Morgentaler's facility April 1. So far Manitoba has shown little interest in paying for the estimated 800 abortions a year performed at the clinic, despite what the new owners believe is a growing demand.

"If the government is doing such a wonderful job of meeting the needs of Manitoba women, why would we have seen 84 women this month alone," said Heather Dawson, a clinic nurse and co-owner. Women pay about \$450 for the procedure at the clinic.

Healthy Living Minister Jim Rondeau said there is capacity in the Winnipeg and Brandon hospitals to handle the abortion needs of Manitoba women. The

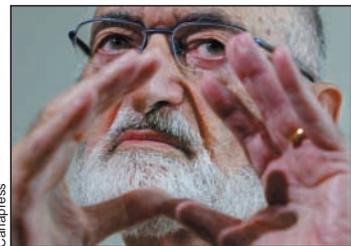
province pays for procedures performed at 2 hospitals.

Rondeau denied that the Manitoba government is philosophically opposed to contracting with Jane's Clinic. He said more than a dozen different organizations, including Jane's Clinic, are negotiating with the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority to revamp women's health services.

Rondeau said his government is studying a plan to establish a \$1-million "super clinic" for women, which would include abortion services. No timing has been announced.

"Jane's clinic isn't necessarily going to be part of the solution, no," Rondeau said.

When the NDP government came into power in 1999, Morgentaler offered to donate his clinic to the province if the government paid for all abortions. However, negotiations between the province and Morgentaler broke down in late 2002, with each side accusing the other of bad faith.



**Morgentaler sold the clinic in the hope of obtaining government funding.**

Morgentaler sold the business in the "hope that by ... removing myself entirely from the picture, the government will see its way clear to do what is right: fully fund procedures at the new Jane's Clinic."

The clinic has been an option for Manitoba women who can't get a government-funded abortion before their 16th week of pregnancy. In 2003, several women complained they were forced to visit the Morgentaler clinic and pay the fee because of waiting lists that would have taken them beyond 16 weeks. — *Dan Lett, Winnipeg*

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