Vioxx (Rofecoxib) Questions and Answers

Q1. **What is rofecoxib?**

A. Rofecoxib is a cyclo-oxygenase-2 (COX-2 selective) non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medicine (NSAID) used in Malta since October 2001. It is used as a treatment for osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis.

Q2. **What are COX-2 selective NSAIDs?**

A. Anti-inflammatory medicines have been available for many years and are important in the treatment of arthritis and many other painful conditions. One disadvantage of NSAIDs is their potential to cause gastro-intestinal side effects, which in rare cases can be serious (e.g. ulcers and bleeding). COX-2 selective NSAIDs are a relatively new type of anti-inflammatory medicine, which are thought to produce less gastrointestinal side effects than older 'non-selective' NSAIDs.

Q3. **Why is rofecoxib being withdrawn?**

A. On the 30th September 2004, Merck & Co., Inc. announced the immediate worldwide withdrawal of rofecoxib, following clinical trial results (the APPROVe study), which showed an increased risk of confirmed serious thrombotic events (including myocardial infarction and stroke) compared to placebo, following long-term use.

Q4. **What new risk has been shown with the 'APPROVe' clinical trial results?**

A. The APPROVe study was a multi-centre, randomised, placebo-controlled, doubleblind study to determine the effect of 3 years treatment with Vioxx on the recurrence of neoplastic polyps of the large bowel in patients with a history of colorectal adenoma. The trial, which started in 2000, enrolled 2,600 patients and compared Vioxx 25mg to placebo.

In this study 25 patients taking placebo versus 45 patients taking Vioxx experienced confirmed serious thrombotic event. The absolute event rates were approximately 3 per 400 patient years for placebo and 6 per 400 patient years for Vioxx, **i.e. an absolute increase in risk of approximately 3 thrombotic events per 400 patient years of treatment**. The difference in event rates was only apparent after 18 months treatment.

Q5. **Does this advice affect any other similar medicines?**

A. No, the new evidence and advice is specific to rofecoxib and is not generalised to other COX-2 selective inhibiting NSAIDs (celecoxib, valdecoxib, etoricoxib and parecoxib).

Q6. **What is the advice for patients?**

A. The Medicines Authority recommends that patients taking Vioxx should contact their doctor to arrange alternative treatment at their earliest convenience.

Q7. **How are doctors and patients being informed?**

A. The Medicines Authority has issued a press release regarding the withdrawal of Vioxx and has drafted this Questions and Answers document for the perusal of patients.

A.M.Mangion, the local distributors for Vioxx have informed doctors through The Synapse, a local network for medical professionals (www.thesynapse.net) as well as an e-mail sent via The Synapse. A Dear Doctor Letter is also being sent to all local doctors and pharmacists.

Q8. **Is this a new issue? Why hasn't this been found earlier?**

A. The cardiovascular safety of rofecoxib and other COX-2 inhibitors has been reviewed by the Pharmacovigilance Working Party at the European Medicines Agency (EMEA) and by other scientific bodies on a number of occasions since 2000. The APPROVe study has given the first conclusive evidence of an increased cardiovascular risk with rofecoxib.

Q9. **What is happening elsewhere in the world?**

A. Rofecoxib is being voluntarily withdrawn worldwide by Merck & Co., Inc.