

Safer medicine

A number of new medicines have been criticised for being unsafe. The drug companies which produce them deny these claims. Who is right?

1 Match the following medical conditions with the description of their effects.

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|----------------------|---|
| (a) a heart attack | (1) can cause heart disease, due to the amount of this substance in the blood |
| (b) a stroke | (2) makes your joints swollen and painful |
| (c) diabetes | (3) causes pain because the heart stops working normally |
| (d) arthritis | (4) can make someone suddenly unable to speak or move |
| (e) high cholesterol | (5) makes it difficult to breathe |
| (f) asthma | (6) the body cannot reduce the amount of sugar in the blood |
- Descriptions based on those in the Macmillan English Dictionary (2002 Text © Bloomsbury)

2 Read the article below quickly and underline any of the medical conditions listed in exercise 1.

Drug companies on trial. A US expert has claimed that five drugs currently on the market are 'unsafe'. They include *Crestor*, a cholesterol-lowering drug from Astra Zeneca, and *Serevent* from GlaxoSmithKline, which is used by asthma patients. The share price of both companies fell dramatically as a result of these negative comments. The expert is a member of the US government's Food and Drug Administration, the FDA, whose responsibilities include working with the pharmaceutical industry to design clinical trials in order to bring new drugs to the market. The FDA has rejected his allegations.

Both Astra Zeneca and GSK have denied the accusations, claiming their products are safe and effective. The CEO of *Astra Zeneca* has called for a new system of 'conditional approval' for new drugs, so that they can be further monitored for side-effects after initial launch. He says that this will allow companies to gain a better knowledge of the

drug after it has been prescribed to many more patients than is possible in clinical trials. However, such an idea may slow down sales.

The pharmaceutical industry is receiving a lot of negative criticism at the moment. Many think that prices are too high. There has been recent concern about unethical behaviour by drug companies after GSK was fined for allegedly suppressing negative clinical trial data. In the biggest drug recall in history, pharmaceutical giant Merck was forced to withdraw *Vioxx* from the market last September when a company-sponsored trial found that patients who took the drug for more than 18 months doubled their risk of heart attack or stroke. *Merck* is now facing legal claims of billions of dollars. 'You cannot have innovation without risk' claim the drug companies; on the other hand, surely the public has a right to safe medicine.

3 Read the article again and summarise the different viewpoints of the pharmaceutical industry and its critics. Use the following collocations where possible.

new system	negative criticism	initial launch	unethical behaviour
share price	product recall	to suppress data	to face a claim

4 Discuss the following questions in small groups and report back to the class.

- (1) Do you feel generally positive or negative about the pharmaceutical industry in your country? Why?
- (2) Are drugs over-priced? Are drug companies more interested in profits than in saving lives?
- (3) Do you think that drugs are sometimes rushed onto the market before they are completely safe?