On eve of new advice on HRT, a campaign to push benefits raises concerns

Cancer experts fear that risks associated with treatment for the menopause could be drowned out, says Sarah Boseley

A PR campaign to promote the use of HRT (hormone replacement therapy) by women is under way before the release of official guidance on treating the menopause next week, raising fears among scientists that the cancer dangers of the drugs will be underplayed.

The campaign – run by the Weber Shandwick agency, and funded by a drug manufacturer that provides the treatment – has put out a survey saying that women are unnecessarily worried about the risks of HRT and is preparing a further release about the affidavits of GPs prescribing the drugs.

Their activity comes ahead of the new guidance on treating the menopause from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (Nice) which is due to be released next Thursday. It is likely to say that there are risks as well as benefits to taking HRT, but cancer scientists fear the warning may be drowned out and the guidance taken as an endorse-ment of the use of the drugs in most women with menstrual symptoms.

These can include flashes, interrupted sleep and mood swings and can be debilitating. Doctors agree that HRT resolves the problems, but the debate is about side effects.

Professor Valerie Berdal, the Oxford epidemiologist who leads the Million Women Study which linked HRT to breast and ovarian cancer, fears that women will be misled into thinking the drugs are completely safe by the recent research. She says there are clear risks. “About 1 million UK women are currently taking hormones for the menopause,” she said.

“All of our research into 16,000 extra breast cancers are estimated to occur in the UK over a 10-year period instead of 30,000 if the women had not used the hormone. All of our research into extra ovarian cancers are estimated to occur among them in the next 10 years – 6,000 in total instead of 5,000 if the women had not used the hormones.”

Cancer specialists say that the Nice committee which is dominated by breast and gynaecologists who are members of the British Menopause Society (BMS), which has tended to take a favourite view of HRT and clashed with the cancer scientists in the past. The scientists involved in the Oxford research have approached the UK drug regulator with their concerns.

The first salvo in the Weber Shandwick campaign came two weeks ago, when a minor piece of unpublished research, presented at a fertility conference in Baltimore, was picked up and turned into front-page stories by UK newspapers. The reports said that it proved HRT was harmless and that a generation of women had needlessly avoided HRT because of the cancer scares. “It’s official – HRT is NOT a danger to women as experts conclusively dis-miss worries over safety,” ran the headline in the Mirror. The Guardian also ran a version of the story.

Dr Nick Panay, a consultant gynaecologist and former chair of the BMS who is on the Nice guidance committee, was quoted as saying “welcoming the news”, saying: “The right HRT preparation, in the right woman, has low overall risks and has significant benefits. Too many women are being denied hormone ther-apy that might benefit from it.”

However, Panay told the Guardian that his comments were taken out of context and that he had not read the detail of the study at the time. “I was not aware of the real number of extra ovarian cancers it was suggesting,” he said.

We are squabbling amongst ourselves, but we do know some facts and it is complex, said Jane Green, epidemiologist who ran and we active a statement saying it was “deeply con-cerned”.

The study was tiny, involving just 80 women who had been taking HRT for 10 years and had not suffered from cancer or any other side-effect of the drugs. But the evidence that breast cancer and ovarian cancer risks rise with HRT use comes mainly from two huge studies, the Women’s Health Initiative in the US and the Million Women Study at Oxford, which Cancer Research UK funds.

The author of the research that had been picked up in the British press, gynaecologist Dr Lila Nacharajah, at New York University, condemned the stories.

“The UK coverage of her work had been “ridiculous”, she told the Guardian. The study had been about body composition, not cancer — looking at where women accumulated fat if they put on weight while taking HRT. She had found it interesting that some had developed cancer, but “we did not make it very clear it was not a study. It was an observation.”

Weber Shandwick launched their own survey about wom-en’s fear of HRT to coincide with Nacharajah’s low-key slide presentation in Bal-timore at the meeting of the American Society of Reproductive Medicine.

“We got wind of the fact there was this study,” said an account execu-tive. “The stories that ran in the press really put the issue back on the agenda.” There has been this lost decade of women who haven’t taken HRT, she pointed out. “We’re hoping with the Nice guidance that will change.”

The agency’s survey of just over 1,000 women was funded by Mylan pharmaceuticals, which has recently bought Abbott’s generic drugs business, a supplier of HRT in Europe. An accompanying press release said: “A staggering 62% of women are avoiding HRT which could allevi-ate the most common symptoms associated with the menopause.”

Julian de Giebre, Mylan UK’s head of medical affairs, drew the link with the new Nice guidance. “The new guidelines will inform and reassure women who are seeking a solution for their menopausal symptoms”, he said.

The BMS comprises medical profes-sionals, mostly gynaecologists. A number of the Nice guidance commi-ttee members belong to it, including the chair and a lay mem-ber, who is the BMS chief executive.

Nice said in a statement that it regarded as widely as possible to its guidance committees through open, competitive advertising. “It appoints members from the NHS, academia and industry as well as lay members with an understanding of ... healthcare issues. All of our guidance is also subject to public consultation and we actively seek the views of healthcare professionals, patient groups and national organisa-tions independent of the guideline development group which effectively minimises the risk of undue influence to any guideline,” it said in a statement.

The Million Women Study estimates that among 1 million women in the UK currently using HRT, above, there will be into extra breast cancers over 10 years. Photograph: Flickr

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5 Year Fixed Rate Repayment Mortgage

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