Drug Effectiveness Review Project (DERP) - 2005

At a time when millions of children and adults are taking drugs for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, the most comprehensive scientific analysis of the drugs to date has found little evidence that they are safe, that one drug is more effective than another or that they help school performance. The 731-page report was done by the Drug Effectiveness Review Project, based at Oregon State University. The group analyzed 2,287 studies – virtually every investigation ever done on ADHD drugs anywhere in the world – to reach its conclusions.

Some of the findings from this review included:

There is a severe lacking of clinical trials relating to the long-term effectiveness and safety of ADHD medication.

"No evidence on long-term safety of drugs used to treat ADHD in young children" or adolescents.

"Good quality evidence … is lacking" that ADHD drugs improve "global academic performance, consequences of risky behaviors, social achievements" and other measures.

Safety evidence is of "poor quality," including research into the possibility that some ADHD drugs could stunt growth, one of the greatest concerns of parents.

The way the drugs work is, in most cases, not well understood.

The 27 drugs studied included Adderall, Concerta, Strattera, Ritalin, Focalin, Cylert, Provigil,

The project could not find a "good quality" study that tested the drugs against each other. It also could not find comparative evidence to determine which ADHD drugs are less likely to cause tics, seizures and heart and liver problems.

That evidence is needed. Canadian authorities have recently warned against using Adderall Extended Release in patients with heart problems. Cylert and Strattera have been linked to liver damage, the report said.

Until better research is done, the findings mean that choosing the right ADHD drug is largely a matter of trial and error. In fact, in the few instances where the Oregon group could draw conclusions, it found Concerta "did not show overall difference in outcomes" compared to generic Ritalin, and proof that Adderall is better "lacking." What little evidence there is comparing another newer expensive drug, Strattera, to generic Ritalin "suggests a lack of difference in efficacy."

ADHD DRUG COSTS*

• Methylphenidate (generic Ritalin) $15.69

• Ritalin (brand name): $27.79

• Amphetamine/dextroamphetamine (generic Adderall): $47.09

• Adderall (brand name): $94.49

• Concerta: $103.99

• Strattera: $123.99

• Focalin: $25.99

*Comparisons based on the lowest dose for 30 days. Source: Walgreens Pharmacy

The Oregon State University Drug Effectiveness Review Project is online at www.ohsu.edu/drugeffectiveness/