

Adverse Reactions

Is there a horrible secret about dementia drugs? ★★★★★

Are drug companies hiding some terrible secret from us about their dementia drugs? The signs aren't good. So far they've sponsored seven expensive trials on the drugs, and yet they've decided to publish just two of them.

Of the five that remain unpublished, two are so under wraps that nobody is revealing any information about the findings. Even researchers from King's College in London and the National Institute of Health in Rome were turned away when they requested the data.

The real worry is that the drugs may be killing the patient, but there's no way of knowing for sure. The researchers say that fatalities recorded in the studies they were allowed to see were so badly reported that it was impossible to tell.

What did come across very clearly was that the drugs – classified as cholinesterase inhibitors – are useless at preventing dementia, and may not even be much good for the patient who already has dementia or Alzheimer's.

The drugs, donepezil (Aricept), rivastigmine (Exelon) and galantamine (Razadyne), are routinely given to older people who foolishly see their doctor because they have started to forget things. The fact we forget where we left the car keys doesn't qualify as a medical condition – at best it's known as mild cognitive impairment – but doctors fear that these signs of getting older may be a precursor of dementia. Equally, they may not be, but with a forgetful patient in front of him, the prescription-happy doctor may suggest one of the cholinesterase inhibitors.

We know the drugs won't help him, but beyond that we don't know the fate of the patient. And the manufacturer clearly doesn't want to tell us.

For the full study, see PLoS Medicine, 2007; 4 (11): e338. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.0040338

Published 14 December 2007 11:13 by [Bryan Hubbard](#)