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## IDEAS & OPINION

# Doctors need hormone ed

In light of the recent news on hormone therapies, women are wondering whether they should trust their doctors to advise them on this complex issue. They should — if their doctors do their homework.

Doctors are meant to be the go-to people for medical direction. But in the case of hormones, doctors must fully understand the risks, be up on the latest scientific literature and get behind research efforts that will fill in the blanks on these complex therapies. It's important, as well, for doctors to be sensitive to a woman's unease about the changing perception of hormones and open to patients who bring in articles or information that may offer conflicting views.

When the National Institutes of Health canceled its hormone replacement study because of a slightly increased risk of breast cancer and heart disease associated with the combination hormone drug Prempro, doctors everywhere received an overnight mailing from Wyeth, the drug's manufacturer. This missive encouraged them to keep prescribing the drug, even as the company stock sank.

One hopes that the NIH action will cut down on the frivolous use of the hormone, which was sometimes used simply to combat the effects of normal aging — a habit encouraged by the drug company.

Now the necessary conversation between doctor and patient can proceed without drug company hype. Let's just hope that the old hype won't be replaced by a new wave of fear.

The valid use of a hormone as a medicine to treat the severe symptoms and illness of a woman's menopause gone awry should be preserved. And, indeed, many doctors are still recommending hormone replacement therapy.



*Alarmed patients need more research & the best information*

**MARC SIEGEL, M.D.**

But before the study's cancellation, too many women were offered it. Rampant, uncontrolled advertising distorted and fictionalized medical fact to create an audience eager for the treatment. In this case, the powerful image of prolonged youth was enough to persuade millions of women to ask their doctors for the drug.

Now women are being brought up short by the news of potential side effects. That's not necessarily a bad thing. Physicians are better off not being too comfortable prescribing powerful pills for cosmetic purposes.

But there are also patients who truly benefit from these drugs who must not be made fearful. Hot flashes, mood swings and night sweats are part of a constellation of symptoms that could be called menopause-associated illness. As treatment for this condition, hormone replacement is short-term, well-monitored and safe.

If fear of hormone therapy mushrooms to the point where women with emotionally debilitating symptoms due to hormone shifts end up on antidepressants instead of hormone replacement, it will be unfortunate.

The conversation between doctor and patient about hormone therapy has never been easy, especially for those looking for yes or no answers to complex medical questions.

With luck — and continuing education — hype can now be subtracted from the equation. Many women who were taking hormones just to feel younger will discover that they feel just as well without them. That's good. Other women with menopause-associated illness will benefit if they decide to stay the course, because the risks are truly slight. And that's good, too.

As always, treatments and medicines are best determined rationally, on a patient-by-patient basis.

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