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HIGHEST PRICED AIDS DRUG EVER--- MEDICAL MAYHEM AND A DEADLY PRECEDENT

People living with AIDS and in need of a new drug to combat lethal resistant forms of the virus are outraged over an announcement of the highest price ever for an anti-HIV medicine. Roche Pharmaceuticals, headquartered in Nutley, New Jersey, has set a preliminary price in Switzerland equal to $20,500 per year for its new drug, Fuzeon.

Also known as T-20, Fuzeon is the first in a new class of drugs called "fusion inhibitors." The drug works by stopping the virus from attaching to the human t-cell. Studies have shown that the medication is effective against resistant forms of the virus. To date, it has proven most effective in treating people with HIV who have few other treatment options.

Experts estimate that the U.S. price for Fuzeon will be $25,000 a year, at least four to five times higher than most FDA approved AIDS drugs. The high cost will make it unaffordable for most Medicaid and AIDS Drug Assistance Programs (ADAPs).

"It is a tragic state of affairs in drug development when an encouraging break-through drug cannot be accessed by the people who need it most," said Daniel Raymond from the AIDS Treatment Activist Coalition.

Roche has submitted a new drug application in the U.S. and will seek FDA approval in late March. The company has said that the drug is extremely difficult to make and production and development costs have been exorbitant. AIDS activists are unimpressed.

"I am reminded of the days when drug companies priced protease inhibitors according to all the market would bear," said Lynda Dee from AIDS Action Baltimore, "but this price is completely contemptible and the AIDS community will do everything in its power to stop Roche's inhumane price-gouging."

Some HIV treatment advocates say that Roche may be shooting itself in the foot with such a high price. Fuzeon could break the bank for HIV prescription programs such as ADAP and Medicaid, programs that are already financially strapped due to the lagging economy and the general high cost of all AIDS therapies.

"Existing drugs in these formularies are high priced as it is. Adding an elite, higher priced drug such as Fuzeon will bankrupt all existing programs, forcing them to pick and choose which drugs to include, or decide to close down. The programs have no choice but to *not* include Fuzeon. They are struggling as it is," said Lei Chou of the AIDS Treatment Data Network.

The medication is not just expensive, it is also difficult to administer. Due to its complex chemical structure, Fuzeon must be injected twice daily. In studies, 98 percent of the people who used the drug experienced painful injection site reactions. Still, for some, this therapy is treatment of last resort.

"I have been on virtually every AIDS drug and have not had very good luck so far. T-20 has brought my virus levels under control, but I may not be able to get it if Oregon ADAP cannot afford it." said Fred Schaich a person with AIDS from Portland, Oregon "I really need this drug to stay alive."

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This release provided by the Drug Development Committee of ATAC. (AIDS Treatment Activist Coalition) We are a national coalition of AIDS activists, many living with HIV/AIDS, working together to end the AIDS epidemic by advancing research on HIV/AIDS.