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ALERT

Acitretin : extension of contraceptive period after discontinuation of therapy

Acitretin (Neotigason®, Soriatane®: Hoffmann La Roche) which has been proposed by the manufacturer to replace etretinate, is marketed in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Uruguay. Both products, which are indicated in very serious forms of psoriasis, are teratogenic, and both bear labelled warnings that women of child-bearing potential must use effective contraceptive measures during and after treatment. Because etretinate has an extremely long half-life in the body, this precaution must be continued for at least two years after discontinuation of treatment. Acitretin - which is a major metabolite of etretinate - has a shorter half-life and it was thought to be sufficient to maintain contraception for a period of 2 months only after treatment.

However, results of recent chemical analyses of blood samples, using a newly developed method, indicate that a metabolite, possibly similar in structure to etretinate, may be formed in some treated patients. The ultimate significance will become apparent only when the structure of the molecule has been confirmed. Work to this end is ongoing at several Roche research centres. All national drug regulatory authorities that have either registered or that are currently considering registration applications for acitretin have been informed of these facts by Roche and the company has requested that pending registration applications be suspended.

On 26 October 1990, the Dutch Health Authority decided, after consultation with the company, that the following changes be made in the product information:

1. All women of child-bearing potential who have already taken the product must use an effective method of contraception for at least two years after discontinuing treatment.

2. Its use is henceforth contraindicated in all girls and women of child-bearing potential.

On 27 October 1990, the French Ministry of Health decided to suspend the marketing licence for acitretin until more is known about the identity of the presumed metabolite. In the interim the product licence for etretinate (Tigason®) has been reinstated. A press release has been issued advising all women of child-bearing age who have been treated with acitretin since it was first marketed in December 1989 to consult their doctor.

National authorities in other countries in which acitretin is marketed have agreed with the manufacturer, on a provisional basis, to extend the period of contraception to at least two years. The product has been recalled from all wholesalers and pharmacies to allow for the proposed changes in the package inserts to be effected. All physicians and pharmacists have been informed by letter that the post-treatment period of contraception must be extended.

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