EUROPEAN MEDICINES AGENCY
SCIENCE MEDICINES HEALTH

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Questions and answers

Refusal of the marketing authorisation for Winfuran (nalfurafine)

On 19 December 2013, the Committee for Medicinal Products for Human Use (CHMP) adopted a negative opinion, recommending the refusal of the marketing authorisation for the medicinal product Winfuran, intended for the treatment of severe uraemic pruritus (a form of itching) in patients with end-stage kidney disease on dialysis.

The company that applied for authorisation is Toray International U.K. Limited. It may request a re-examination of the opinion within 15 days of receipt of notification of this negative opinion.

What is Winfuran?

Winfuran is a medicine that contains the active substance nalfurafine. It was to be available as a concentrate for solution for infusion into a vein.

What was Winfuran expected to be used for?

Winfuran was expected to be used for the treatment of patients with severe uraemic pruritus. Uraemic pruritus is a persisting form of itching that occurs in some patients whose kidneys are not functioning properly. Winfuran was to be used in patients with end-stage renal disease (when the kidneys have stopped working completely) and who are on dialysis (a technique for removing waste products from the blood).

Winfuran was designated an 'orphan medicine' (a medicine to be used in rare diseases) on 11 September 2002 for uraemic pruritus.

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How is Winfuran expected to work?

Although the exact cause of uraemic pruritus is not known it is thought that the itching is linked to an excessive activity of certain receptors called mu-opioid receptors in the brain and skin. Winfuran activates different opioid receptors, called kappa receptors, which block the activity of the mu-opioid receptors and therefore relieve the itching in patients with uraemic pruritus.

What did the company present to support its application?

The effects of Winfuran were first tested in experimental models before being studied in humans.

The effects of Winfuran were compared with placebo (a dummy treatment) in one main study involving 339 patients with uraemic pruritus who were on regular dialysis. The main measure of effectiveness was the change in symptoms such as itching intensity and sleep disturbance after 4 weeks of treatment based on a standard scoring system.

What were the CHMP's main concerns that led to the refusal?

The CHMP's main concern was that the benefits of Winfuran in the treatment of uraemic pruritus had not been sufficiently shown. The main study failed to show that Winfuran was more effective than placebo at relieving itching. Although an additional analysis showed a modest benefit in a subpopulation of patients with a severe form of uraemic pruritus, the CHMP considered that the clinical relevance had not been shown. Therefore, at that point in time, the CHMP was of the opinion that the benefits of Winfuran did not outweigh its risks and recommended that it be refused marketing authorisation.

What consequences does this refusal have for patients in clinical trials or compassionate use programmes?

The company informed the CHMP that there are no ongoing clinical trials or compassionate use programmes for Winfuran.

The summary of the opinion of the Committee for Orphan Medicinal Products for Winfuran can be found on the Agency's website ema.europa.eu/Find medicine/Human medicines/Rare disease designation.