

Drug prescribed for PTSD raises concerns

AP Associated Press

By Associated Press | August 30, 2010

WASHINGTON — Thousands of soldiers suffering from PTSD have been given a potent antipsychotic called Seroquel over the last nine years, helping to make it one of the US Department of Veteran Affairs' top drug expenditures and the No. 5 best-selling drug in the nation.

Several soldiers and veterans have died while on the medication, raising concerns among some military families that the government is not being upfront about the drug's risks. They want Congress to investigate.

Andrew White returned from a nine-month tour in Iraq beset with signs of post-traumatic stress disorder: insomnia, nightmares, constant restlessness. Doctors tried to ease his symptoms using three psychiatric drugs, including Seroquel.

His nightmares persisted. So doctors recommended progressively larger doses of Seroquel. At one point, the 23-year-old Army corporal was prescribed more than 1,600 milligrams per day — more than double the maximum dose recommended for schizophrenia patients.

A short time later, White died in his sleep.

An investigation by the Department of Veterans Affairs concluded that White died from a rare drug interaction. He was also taking an antidepressant and an anti-anxiety pill, as well as a painkiller for which he did not have a prescription.

Spending for Seroquel by the government's military medical systems has increased more than sevenfold since the start of the war in Afghanistan in 2001, according to documents obtained by the Associated Press.

The drug's potential side effects, including diabetes, weight gain, and uncontrollable muscle spasms, have resulted in thousands of lawsuits.

Last year, researchers at Vanderbilt University published a study suggesting a new risk: sudden heart failure.

It found that there were three cardiac deaths per year for every 1,000 patients taking anti-psychotic drugs like Seroquel. Seroquel's unique sedative effect sets it apart from others in its class as the top choice for treating insomnia and anxiety.

AstraZeneca, maker of the drug, said it is reviewing the study. The FDA is conducting its own review. ■