

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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Celebrities Help 'Educate' Public On New Drugs

By DAVID P. HAMILTON

MOST PEOPLE don't know what febrile neutropenia is, and even fewer have heard of a new drug for the condition called Neulasta.

But many, many people know Rob Lowe, which is why the actor from the hit television show "The West Wing" is kicking off a campaign today to raise public awareness of the ailment—and indirectly, Amgen Inc. hopes, the fortunes of its new medication.

Mr. Lowe is scheduled to appear today on "The Rosie O'Donnell Show" and "Entertainment Tonight" to talk about febrile neutropenia, a term for infections that can plague patients undergoing cancer chemotherapy. Tomorrow, he will spend the day in a studio taping interviews with local TV stations around the U.S. He plans to make additional media appearances during the coming year.

Such celebrity campaigns are an increasingly popular way for drug makers to draw public attention to the maladies their medicines are designed to address. Celebrities often appear in paid drug ads, such as Lance Armstrong on behalf of Bristol-Myers Squibb Co. and its cancer drugs and Bob Dole on behalf of Pfizer Inc.'s Viagra. Amgen is using another approach—that other drug companies also have tried—which counts on the fame of celebrities such as Mr. Lowe to win time on TV programs eager to feature stars talking about serious medical topics. Those programs, when asked, generally say they air such segments because the celebrities have a "compelling story."

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which strictly regulates pharmaceuticals advertising, says such celebrity appearances don't need to conform to its rules unless the spokesman mentions a particular product by name. If, for instance, Mr. Lowe were to mention Neulasta in one of his TV appearances,

FDA rules would require him to summarize the main side effects of the drug and to tell consumers where to find more detailed information via an 800 number or a Web site, an FDA spokesman says.

"I'm not selling a specific medicine," says Mr. Lowe, whose father, Chuck, suffered a neutropenic infection during chemotherapy for lymphoma in the early 1990s. (He recovered and is free of cancer.) "I am raising awareness of the biggest side effect of chemotherapy, which happens to be the one people know the least about."

Still, the line between outreach and advertising can be blurry. Amgen, a major biotechnology company in Thousand Oaks, Calif., has briefed Mr. Lowe on Neulasta and its effects, "so he's equipped with that information if he's asked about it," says Osnat Benshoshan, an Amgen marketing manager for Neulasta. Mr. Lowe, who is being paid by Amgen for the appearances, says any decision to mention particular products will depend on "whether I feel comfortable" doing so, and emphasizes that his goal is "to help people engage their doctors."

Such so-called educational campaigns are especially important to pharmaceuticals companies when the medical condition is relatively rare and largely unknown even among the patients it can afflict, as with neutropenia.

Febrile neutropenia is unquestionably a serious problem. Since chemotherapy can decimate the body's disease-fighting white-blood cells, many cancer patients are at higher risk of serious infection, which can lead to hospitalization and interruption of their treatment.

But this campaign is important to Amgen for another reason, one familiar to many other pharmaceuticals makers. Neulasta, which Amgen launched earlier this month, is an update of an older Amgen drug called Neupogen that is commonly used to treat neutropenic infections. However, whereas Ne-

switch to the new drug and to use it to prevent neutropenia instead of merely treating such infections after the fact. That would open up a far larger market for Neulasta than Neupogen ever enjoyed—and Neupogen is one of the best-selling biotechnology drugs ever, with world-wide sales last year of \$1.3 billion.

Company marketers such as Ms. Benshoshan, however, worried that traditional doctor-focused marketing might take too long to get the attention of harried oncologists.

The answer: enlist the help of patients and their caregivers. "We know that patients can change physician prescribing behavior," she says.

Amgen, which has never marketed its products directly to the public before, began considering the benefits of marketing a specialty cancer medicine more broadly to the public. Such campaigns are rare, although not wholly unknown—Amgen rival Johnson & Johnson has run TV ads for its Procrit, which fights anemia induced by chemotherapy.

Using a celebrity to raise awareness of neutropenia was immediately appealing. Ms. Benshoshan says. A year or so earlier, she had headed up a campaign in which New York Yankees manager Joe Torre made media appearances to talk about his battle with prostate cancer. While Amgen considered the campaign a success, it pulled the plug last year when its experimental prostate-cancer drug—since dropped—proved disappointing.

Drug companies prefer celebrities with a personal connection to the medical condition in question. But finding the right person isn't easy. That's why Amgen turned to Amy Doner Schachtel, a consultant and former public relations executive in Essex Fells, N.J., who specializes in helping pharmaceuticals companies identify and hire celebrities. Ms. Schachtel knew Mr. Lowe previously had helped raise money for breast cancer—his grandmother and great grandmother died of it, but was floored to find out after contacting the actor's agent that his father had suffered febrile neutropenia.

Mr. Lowe agreed to meet with Amgen as he was on his way home to Santa Barbara, Calif., from the "West Wing" set in Los Angeles. Amgen staffers lined the halls to get a glimpse at the actor, who says visiting the biotech company was like "walking into Futureworld."

Amgen's marketing team liked Mr. Lowe's story about his father and found him enthusiastic and well-spoken. Even better news rested in the actor's high "Q score," a measure of how credible an audience finds a public figure. Mr. Lowe's score was particularly high among women age 50 and older, one of Amgen's prime targets in the Neulasta campaign.

A star like Mr. Lowe, however, doesn't come cheaply. An individual familiar with the arrangement said the actor is likely to receive upward of \$1 million for the campaign, although he may donate at least part of that to charity; a representative for Mr. Lowe declines to comment. Ms. Benshoshan says only that Mr. Lowe is a "highly paid actor" who is being compensated for his time.

Amgen is contemplating a consumer-advertising campaign for Neulasta in the fall and already has drawn up draft TV commercials for Neulasta and is screening them in focus groups. The company, however, won't decide whether to proceed with the ad campaign until it can estimate how much sales will increase for a given advertising "buy."

Amgen also submits its advertising to the FDA for review, a voluntary step the company says helps it preserve a "good relationship" with regulators.

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