

## Say no to Viagra

Judging by the recent success of Viagra (sildenafil) a visitor from outer space might conclude that what truly distinguishes man from other species is his desire to take pills affecting his reproductive functions. For here comes the sensational blue diamond shaped pill that for \$7-10 (£4-6) inhibits phosphodiesterase type 5, maintains high levels of cyclic guanosine monophosphate in the corpus cavernosum, causes local vasodilatation and smooth muscle relaxation, and promises to revolutionize the love life of 140 million people in the world.

Studied in over 4000 people, including a 74 year old retired senator who had undergone prostatectomy, it helped some 60-80% of people suffering from erectile dysfunction a condition well studied by plethysmography and an internationally agreed questionnaire and found to be organic in 58% of cases, psychogenic in 17%, and mixed in 24%. Sildenafil takes about one hour to act, but the manufacturer hopes to develop a pill that will induce instant gratification.

Yet already side effects abound. Sildenafil has caused headache in 16% of patients and flushing in 10%. It has made the price of the drug company's shares go through the roof. It has caused transient blue-green color blindness, enough to alarm ophthalmological societies but not to put off those looking for the desired effect. Some doctors must have developed writer's cramp, given the 120 000 prescriptions written in the second week after the drug's release. A few patients had heartburn. A few health maintenance organizations and insurance companies noted dyspepsia, a symptom they partially relieved by announcing that they would pay only for medically documented erectile dysfunction and only for six tablets a month. This in turn caused heartburn and anxiety among investors and resulted in the stock staying temporarily on the roof and rising no further.

Demand, however, is still on the rise. From abroad I received a letter from an 86 year old widower asking me to reserve a supply of pills before they all sell out. The friendly drug detail man has generously given me two bottles of samples, which I will not send abroad but will quietly pass on to my patients, one tablet at a time, to determine in a truly scientific manner if the stuff really works.

Discovered by serendipity while being tested as an agent for treating heart disease, this modern elixir of love is expected to soon reach the black market and become a popular recreational drug, more popular at parties than even Ecstasy. Some women are now also beginning to complain that, officially at least, they cannot get the drug yet might benefit from it as much as men. Letters are also trickling in from disappointed men who may now be reduced to injecting themselves in the urethra with alprostadil.

Meanwhile one company tried to sell an alprostadil gel that may be applied externally, but Wall Street analysts were not impressed. Another company advertised a product called Veagra, but were forbidden by the courts to use that name. The internet also abounds with advertisements on natural herbal stimulants containing yohimbine and exotic ingredients such as muira puama and vamsa rochna. Try our natural herbs, they say, or consider relaxation by hypnography with professionally written compact disks that will cause a dramatic improvement during intimate moments. "Say no to Viagra" they further advise, for why indeed take an expensive drug that

causes headaches, interacts with other agents metabolized by cytochrome P450, and that must never, never be taken with nitrates, of which a list a page long is given