



International Cancer News

Compiled by Robert Short, News Editor, London

From The Globe

Breast Cancer Risk in Former Contraceptive Pill Users Lasts Only 10 years

There is no long-term increase in breast cancer for former contraceptive pill users. There is a small increase only while taking the pill and for a few years after. This was the conclusion of a major international report on the contraceptive pill and breast cancer published in the *Lancet* [1].

This report is the largest investigation into the cause of cancer ever undertaken, involving 200 scientists in 70 institutions in 25 countries. The report comprises virtually all the worldwide available evidence on the "Pill" and breast cancer. A team from the Imperial Cancer Research Fund's Cancer Epidemiology Unit brought together detailed information on 53 000 women with breast cancer and 100 000 women without breast cancer from 54 international studies.

The head of the charity's Oxford-

based unit, Dr Valerie Beral, said: "We now know that more than 10 years after stopping the Pill, women are not at an increased risk. This result is very reliable, as it is based on information on about 10 000 women with breast cancer who stopped the Pill 10 or more years ago."

She added, "The absence of any increase 10 or more years after stopping is found consistently for all groups of women studied: young women, older women, women with a family history of breast cancer, women of different ethnic origin and women from developed or developing countries. It was also true, regardless of how old women were when they began taking the Pill, how long they took it and what type of Pill they took."

Researcher Dr Gillian Reeves said of the increases observed: "The small increase in the number of cancers diag-

nosed in Pill takers begins soon after starting use and is not affected by how long women take the Pill or by the specific type or dose of Pill used. After women come off the Pill this excess declines, disappearing completely after 10 years."

Although the researchers could not tell why there are these extra cancers among women who recently took the Pill, Dr Reeves said, "What we have found is that the cancers in women on the Pill are less likely to have spread beyond the breast than the cancers in women who have never taken the Pill and this raises the possibility that women on the Pill are picking up their cancers at an earlier stage. If this were so, it could explain why women on the Pill are more likely to be diagnosed with breast cancer."

Figure 1 shows that in 10 000 women who used the Pill from 25 to 29 years of

Topotecan Approved in U.S.A for Ovarian Cancer

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) of the U.S.A. has approved topotecan, the first of a new class of drugs to treat patients with advanced ovarian cancers who have not responded favourably to standard treatments. The U.S.A. is the first major market for which the agent has been licensed although approval throughout Europe and the world is expected over the next year.

Topotecan (Hycamtin-R) is a SmithKline Beecham Pharmaceuticals drug derived from the active agent camptothecin, found in the bark of a

Chinese tree. It works by interfering with topoisomerase I, an enzyme that uncoils DNA before cell division by creating and resealing nicks in the DNA. Altered function of the enzyme eventually leads to tumour cell death.

The EORTC Early Clinical Studies Group has conducted phase II studies with topotecan in patients with small cell lung cancer and colorectal cancer. In both studies, topotecan is given as a short infusion daily for 5 days at a dose of 1.5 mg/m²/day. Patients with small cell lung cancer were grouped into those who were sensitive to earlier

chemotherapy and those who were resistant. Chairman of the Early Clinical Studies Group, Dr Axel-R. Hanauske, said that activity of the agent was found to be significant: "An interim analysis has already shown significant activity of topotecan in small cell lung cancer, given preferably to patients who had responded to prior regimens. The Early Clinical Studies Group has thus pinpointed a tumour entity that warrants further clinical scrutiny of topotecan." The group found that topotecan's activity in colorectal cancer was minor. In the col-