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From The Times

July 18, 2005

You're on your own if you give flab jab, insurers warn doctors

By Sam Lister, Health Correspondent

THE latest technique in the search for the perfect physique has fallen foul of a leading medical insurer. The Medical Protection Society, which provides doctors with legal advice and cover against litigation costs and damages, is refusing to offer indemnity for use of the anti-fat drug Lipostabil as a cosmetic treatment because of growing concerns about its safety.

Drug regulators have started a national campaign against the cosmetic use of Lipostabil for the treatment — commonly known as the “flab jab” — in which it is injected under the skin, after a boom in its use as an anti-cellulite medication. It remains unlicensed for cosmetic purposes because of a lack of clinical research into possible side-effects.

The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) issued a warning last week that it had received three reports of adverse reactions to Lipostabil from patients who had it injected into areas of unwanted body fat.

The drug is licensed in Germany as an intravenous treatment for fat embolism — when blood vessels become blocked by fat particles. The MHRA permits it to be imported for such use, but not for subcutaneous injections in cosmetic surgery, a procedure which Lipostabil’s manufacturer, Aventis, also warns doctors against.

A growing number of British clinics, however, have started importing the drug in the past two years not only for fat embolism but also as an anti-fat treatment. There are also increasing concerns about the promotion and sale of Lipostabil on the internet.

The MHRA is investigating more than 50 clinics across the country over the cosmetic use of Lipostabil — which is also marketed as Flabjab, Lipomelt, Lipodissolve and Fat-Away — and the advertising of an unlicensed product.

As a cosmetic procedure, Lipostabil is normally injected into the chin, below the eyes, stomach, thighs, knees and the behind. A single injection costs about £350, while a full course can run to £2,500.

Lipostabil is a trade name for phosphatidylcholine, which is derived from either egg yolks or soya beans. An enzyme in the protein breaks down the outer membrane of the fat cells, causing them effectively to dissolve.

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Cosmetic use of Lipostabil has already been banned in Brazil, where it was developed, after being linked to serious skin infections. Canadian officials have also ordered doctors to stop using it amid fears about possible nerve damage, while concerns have also been raised in the United States.

Sherry Williams, deputy director of policy at the Medical Protection Society, said that the society had decided to act after the MHRA's action and the widespread availability of cosmetic Lipostabil. "This is the first time we have withdrawn benefits in this way," Dr Williams said. "Our concern was that it was being used subcutaneously and the manufacturer recommended that it shouldn't." Indemnity had been removed for the society's 38,000 UK members and it was considering whether to introduce the policy globally, affecting a further 180,000 doctors.

Norman Waterhouse, aesthetic surgery tutor at the Royal College of Surgeons, said that a cautious approach was sensible. "We know that it does seem to have an effect in dispersing fat. It can work. But there is no clinical data on dosage or frequency of use or anything in relation to its use, including complications."

Some doctors using the treatment said it brought very good results, with a tiny degree of adverse reaction compared with procedures such as liposuction.

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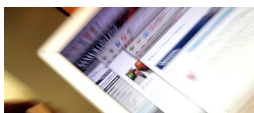
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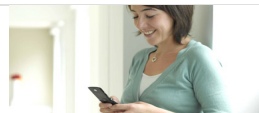
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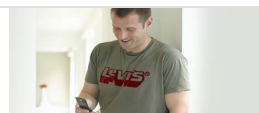
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