A PERFECT DRUG

What you don’t know can help you.

BY DAN ERLANSON

Jeffrey rose slowly, scanned the half-dozen people in the darkly panelled boardroom, and sonorously announced: “You all know the good news. It’s the bad news I’ve gathered you to hear.”

Alan carefully maintained a neutral composure, but quietly he seethed. It was bad enough for the head of commercialization to call an emergency executive meeting without informing him, the chief executive, what it was about. Now Jeffrey was going to theatrically draw out whatever he was planning to say — and there was nothing Alan could do. Jeffrey had powerful supporters on the board; after all, he had certainly delivered for the company.

“As you know, the launch of Paxpharma has been one of the most successful product rollouts in the history of our industry,” Jeffrey continued. “In the crowded field of antidepressants, our drug stands out with the lowest side-effect profile on the market. Uptake has been phenomenal, and we’ve gone from a struggling mid-tier pharmaceutical company with a looming patent cliff to the darling of Wall Street.

“As you also know, Paxpharma didn’t launch. The molecule is a nightmare to synthesize, and the size of the phase III trials necessitated a complete reworking of the manufacturing process. Even with the new synthetic route in place, we barely scraped together enough material for the pivotal trials, let alone for a launch. And, of course, any significant change in manufacturing procedure would have to be approved by the FDA. We realized we couldn’t do it.

“His revere was broken by Jeffrey, who was still pontificating. “As I said at the outset, the good news is that the trials were positive. Paxpharma was approved and is now a major commercial success. Now the bad news.

“When the drug was approved, we were at a loss as to how we could scale up production even further. We struggled to make enough material for the pivotal trials, let alone for a launch. And, of course, any significant change in manufacturing procedure would have to be approved by the FDA. We realized we couldn’t do it in time.”

“There was silence in the room as people tried to digest what they had just heard. Alan realized we couldn’t do it. Jeffrey paused before adding, “Of course, the decision is not mine to make.”

“Of course! Right away — why wouldn’t you?” Jeffrey looked at Alan condescendingly, then gazed slowly around the room. “Think about it. We’ve been selling sugar pills for the past six quarters. “Yes, we were happily surprised by that too. The placebo effect is strong with psychoactive drugs. I guess we never realized how strong.”

“That’s the bad news,” Jeffrey continued. “A small team of us have kept this secret until now, and we could probably continue to do so indefinitely, but some new developments require decisions.

“The production difficulties with Paxpharma are well-known, and we’ve been diligently adding capacity. The new plants are now online, and we believe we can now supply enough active pharmaceutical ingredient to meet demand. The question is, should we?”

Alan shouted: “Of course! Right away — why wouldn’t you?”

Jeffrey paused before adding, “Of course, the decision is not mine to make.”

Alan could feel a dozen eyes on him. The seconds ticked into minutes, and by the time he finally replied, his voice was barely audible.

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