

NEWSWEEK

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Challenging Oprah (Again) on Hormone Therapy
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Early this week, our two resident menopause experts, Pat Wingert and Barbara Kantrowitz, took issue with an Oprah special on Hormone Therapy. In the episode, the television host praised her guest, Suzanne Somers, for a health plan that places heavy emphasis on taking too many hormones. Here's the money quote, from one doctor: "Oprah is the most influential woman in the world, and I don't think she comprehends the amount of damage she has done to women's health."

In summing up their argument, Pat and Barbara pointed to six things that Oprah and Somers did wrong: They downplayed the risks of Hormone Therapy. They failed to discuss cancer. Meanwhile, they encouraged a false fountain of youth. The television show prescribed a one-treatment-fits-all philosophy, while blaming menopause for everything a woman may be going through. Overall, they say the episode lacked clarity when discussing the issue.

Many readers agreed, asking: "Why is Suzanne Somers on stage being lauded as an expert as the doctors sitting in the front row added very little to the conversation?"

But much of the commentary completely dismissed our two writers. "Talking with Kantrowitz and Wingert about [hormone replacement therapy] is like talking to a Republican senator about the economic stimulus plan," wrote one snarky reader. Others argued that many mainstream doctors support excessive HRT, and that our two writers present a completely one-sided argument.

That's the start of what's developed into a series of offensive comments, which have culminated in accusing the writers of being on the take from drug companies. "The article's authors were clearly coached and prompted by the pharmaceutical industry to sing its song-and-dance routine to attack anything that threatens their bottom line," suggested one reader. "I'm shocked that Newsweek would allow its editorial integrity to be so transparently hijacked by these phonies who are doing nothing but parroting the drug companies' script, practically word for word."

Given those strong – and untrue – accusations, I asked my colleagues to put together a response to the piece, clarifying their points about Hormone Replacement Therapy. Here is what Pat submitted:

We appreciate the fact that this story has generated a lively discussion among readers but would like to offer a couple of clarifications. Some commenters have attempted to explain away the concerns we raised about the safety of compounding-pharmacy-produced bio-identical hormones by accusing us (and/or Newsweek) of being on the take to pharmaceutical companies.

These accusations are not only offensive but absolutely not true, and we hope readers are skeptical enough to note that not one of these posters has offered a shred of evidence to prove their point. The magazine accepts advertisements from a wide variety of legitimate businesses, including drug companies, but in the more than 20 years Barbara and I have worked for Newsweek, we have never been asked to slant our reporting or writing to benefit an advertiser. Our advertising and editorial departments have always been separate and independent.

Secondly, there seems to be a lot of confusion about what constitutes a "natural" hormone. Natural hormones are those produced by the human body. Period. Any other type of hormone product, including those used in hormone creams, sprays, rings, pills and patches, are synthesized from plants or animal products. That means they are all synthetics, even if they are chemically identical to those produced by the human body.

Those who insist that all hormones made by drug companies are "synthetics" and those produced by compounding pharmacies are "natural" are creating a false distinction. The same can be said about presumed risk. Since all these products have similar effects on the body, the presumption by the scientific community is that they likely all have the same risks, unless proof emerges to the contrary. So far, we don't have that proof.

And finally, about the advantage of FDA regulation: No one thinks that the FDA does a perfect job, and we all know that they have made mistakes. But there's no doubt that the FDA safety and efficacy testing saves many lives every year.