

Recall of Drugs Leaves Many Dieters Hopeless

By Carey Goldberg

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They know. They know that the drugs would not have been recalled lightly. But still, among the millions of American dieters who had seen Redux and the fen-phen combination as the weight-loss magic they crave, there were voices today expressing a loss of hope, and even sparks of defiance.

“If they sell them in Canada, I’ll drive up there and come back with a carload of them,” said Marlana Bendt, a 65-year-old woman in Hoffman Estates, Ill., who has struggled with her weight all her life and recently lost 70 pounds on fen-phen. “There are people who can’t live without those drugs. For me, fen-phen is an alternative to dying.”

For the obese and for those trying to respond to the dictates of a weight-obsessed culture, the struggle to lose weight often means weighing health risks against the chances of losing weight.

The response to Monday’s recall of fenfluramine, or Pondimin, and dexfenfluramine, or Redux, highlighted the depth of frustration that makes many a dieter willing to risk whatever it takes if only, only he can stop being fat.

So intense can dieters’ desire for pharmaceutical hand-holding become that some doctors said today they had to stonewall outraged patients who insisted on being prescribed the pills, recall or no recall.

Dr. Robert S. Nierman, an obesity specialist in Lexington, Mass., said a patient “came in today, knowing what happened yesterday, and said, ‘I want my fen-phen back.’ And I said, ‘Let’s do a black market, we’d make a fortune,’ but she wasn’t joking. And I said, ‘You could die from heart disease’ and she said, ‘I want it anyway.’ ”

And one Boston weight-loss clinic official said that a patient had once warned her that if doctors here would not prescribe her the fen-phen she wanted, she knew a doctor in New York who would.

“And I thought, boy, this was like going to New York for an abortion,” said Patricia Nelson, associate director of Feeding Ourselves, a hospital-affiliated treatment program for binge eating disorders. “That’s a real testimony about how panicky people are about the issue.”

Panicky, and sad today—for though the drugs caused cardiological disaster for some, injuring their heart valves, they brought prospects of the slimness of fantasy to others.

“It’s almost like, throw it out there and give people hope, then yank it away,” said Maureen McNulty, a patient of Dr. Nierman’s who had been losing weight on a program of drugs and behavior modification since March.

Andrew Rudnick, who founded a chain of five fen-phen -based weight-loss clinics around Boston last year after he lost 60 pounds on the combination, said today that he had been “looking at fen-phen when it first came out as the miracle pill that would change my life. And it’s sort of like finding out that Santa Claus isn’t real, you know?”

“It’s a major letdown, when you thought you had the answer,” he said.

Business has fallen off sharply lately for Mr. Rudnick, whose clinics stopped dispensing fen-phen a week ago, he said, even though his program offered herbal aids and tried-and-true behavior modification along with the pills.

The same goes for Dr. Nierman, who stopped prescribing fenfluramine five months ago when indications mounted that it could cause lung problems. He can still offer patients Ionamin, an amphetamine-like drug that suppresses appetite, as part of a program that includes behavior modification and education; but interest has fallen off, he said, now that there is no illusion of a fen-phen magic bullet.

Many weight-loss clinics around the country have found themselves in similar situations: the wave of attention that surrounded the release of Redux last year and prompted the creation of “pill mills,” or weight-loss clinics built on prescriptions, gave way in recent months to a reverse wave of negative publicity. In Boston alone, nearly half the weight-loss clinics that advertised fen-phen and Redux in this year’s yellow pages seemed to have already gone out of business, their phones disconnected.

So the actual recall of the two popular drugs did not come out of the blue. Neither did word of side effects. Along with the more serious effects

now documented in the study that led to the recall, some fen-phen users reported an uncomfortable hyper feeling, foggy thinking and other troubles.

“You’re taking legalized speed,” said Helen Shull, a retailer in Newport Beach, Calif., who lost 30 pounds on phen-fen but has since gained them back. “We all want that quick fix. It was the answer.”

But, she said, “Now, it will kill us, like everything.”

Florida became so concerned about fen-phen related medical problems that it banned the combination anti-obesity drugs on Sept. 9. In July, 53-year-old Patricia Mishcon, the wife of Mayor Jeffrey Mishcon of North Miami Beach, had died after taking fen-phen prescribed by an ophthalmologist who also ran a weight-loss clinic, and the local coroner linked her death to the drugs, The Miami Herald reported.

“If nothing else comes out of this, hopefully folks will step back and think a little bit before they run off to the next popular treatment of a very serious disease,” said Allen Grossman, the state’s assistant attorney general.

A similar message came today from Sharon Damiani, 59, of Kennesaw, Ga. Her condition was diagnosed as severe primary pulmonary hypertension, a rare and often fatal disease that has been associated with phen-fen, after she used the drugs to lose weight.

To those who are angry over the recall, she said, she would say, “Please, think it over. There’s other ways and other means to lose weight. Walk. Don’t eat fat, don’t eat sugar. Otherwise, be prepared to be thin in your coffin, and see how your family accept that, looking down on you.”

For many, however, the desperation remains. One fen-phen patient, a mother of two in western suburban Boston who insisted on anonymity, said she had asked her doctor if there weren’t some way to introduce a tapeworm into her system.

“I’m just hoping for a freeze-dried worm,” she said.