

CORPORATE FOCUS

How Glaxo Marketed a Malady to Sell a Drug

TV-Ad Blitz, Physician Onslaught Are Unleashed to Inform About Little-Known Disorder

By JEANNE WHALEN

WHEN DRUG GIANT GlaxoSmithKline PLC launched a new medicine for restless-legs syndrome last year, few people had heard of the affliction, and some physicians were skeptical that it even existed.

Today, the drug, Requip, is on track to post sales of \$500 million this year, making it one of the fastest-growing drugs in Glaxo's portfolio.

Behind Requip's sales boom is Glaxo's marketing machine, which has persuaded many consumers and physicians to accept restless-legs syndrome, or RLS, as a real condition warranting treatment. Glaxo began its blitz by advertising the disorder to doctors in medical journals months before the company had regulatory approval to begin selling Requip for RLS. Then, it sent specialists to discuss the disease with general practitioners, who usually see RLS sufferers first. It so heavily advertised the drug directly to consumers that some doctors accuse Glaxo of disease mongering.

Glaxo declined to discuss specifics about its marketing campaign. A spokeswoman for the United Kingdom company said Glaxo is "sharing medical information on a wide variety of conditions, including RLS, which is what we see as our mission."

Pharmaceutical companies, under pressure to increase sales amid pressure from generic rivals, are seeking to treat an ever-expanding range of illnesses and to find additional afflictions in which their drugs can be used. As a

result, they increasingly need to combat skepticism about a disease, just as Glaxo did with RLS. Novartis AG, for example, which makes drugs for both attention-deficit disorder and irritable-bowel syndrome, has used the Internet to overcome doubt and spread information on the conditions and treatments, Novartis Chief Executive Officer Dan Vasella said in an interview.

Restless-legs syndrome causes uncomfortable sensations in the legs and an uncontrollable urge to move. In mild cases, the disorder makes it difficult for a person to sit still. In severe cases, it can keep sufferers up all night.

Glaxo didn't set out to find a drug for RLS. It invented Requip—a compound that regulates the brain chemical dopamine, which is responsible for controlling body movements—to treat Parkinson's disease. Glaxo realized Requip's potential in RLS after some doctors began prescribing it off-label for the disorder.

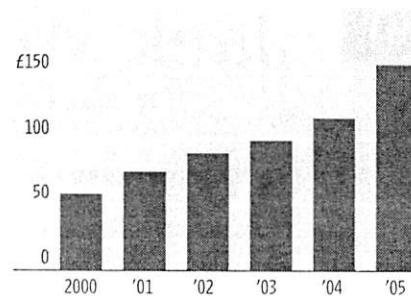
This year, less than half of Requip's expected \$500 million in sales are expected to come from Parkinson's disease; the rest should come from RLS, a Citigroup Inc. research report estimates.

Riding on Glaxo's RLS push, rivals are following suit. Germany's **Boehringer Ingelheim** GmbH, maker of Parkinson's drug Mirapex, has asked the Food and Drug Administration to approve the drug for treating RLS. And Belgium's **UCB SA** plans to seek RLS approval from the FDA for its Parkinson's drug.

Glaxo, the world's second-biggest

Footnote

Global sales of Requip, a drug for restless-legs syndrome, in millions of British pounds



Note: Prior to 2005, Requip was marketed only as a treatment for Parkinson's disease.

£1 million = \$1.88 million at current rate

Source: the company

drug company by sales after **Pfizer Inc.**, knew it faced obstacles as it prepared to launch Requip as an RLS treatment. Glaxo-funded research had shown many RLS sufferers bounce from doctor to doctor for years without a proper diagnosis, the company said. "This was a disorder that was generally overlooked by most physicians and individuals," says John Winkelman, an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School who treats sleep disorders.

Glaxo began telling doctors about the disorder in 2004 with ads in medical journals. One in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in October 2004 showed a woman

tossing and clutching her legs in bed. At the bottom was Glaxo's logo and the slogan: "GlaxoSmithKline: A Leader in RLS Research."

Soon after the FDA approved Requip as an RLS treatment in May 2005, Glaxo hired an army of sleep-disorder specialists and invited general practitioners to dinner at fancy restaurants across the U.S. to hear them speak about Requip, some specialists say.

Philip Becker, medical director of the Sleep Medicine Institute at the Presbyterian Hospital of Dallas, says he has delivered about a dozen such talks in Texas. Dr. Becker, who has treated RLS for 25 years, says he thinks his talks have persuaded some doctors to take the disorder more seriously and to try Glaxo's drug.

To accompany this physician blitz, Glaxo began reaching out to consumers through TV ads. It spent \$36 million on consumer ads for Requip last year, according to Nielsen Monitor-Plus.

The first ads, in the spring of 2005, described the symptoms of RLS without mentioning the drug. Later ads began mentioning Requip, as well.

Awareness of the syndrome rose within months of Glaxo's first TV ads, says the Restless Legs Syndrome Foundation, in Rochester, Minn. It had about 2,600 visitors a day to its Web site before the Glaxo ad campaign. Two months later, about 4,500 people a day were visiting, says Georgianna Bell, executive director of the foundation.