

Stroked

By Larry Amoros

A new drug to treat impotence has hit pharmacy shelves like a firecracker and urologists across the country have come down with a severe case of writer's cramp. Analysts suggest that doctors are writing some 40,000 prescriptions a day for Viagra, the \$10-a-dose "wonder" drug. One report has a Philadelphia doctor so besieged by men seeking prescriptions he had to assign one nurse full-time to meet the demand.

The frenzy of men rushing to their doctor's office is second only to the media frenzy that keeps Viagra in the headlines.

Nearly lost in the stampede was news of other marvelous drugs. About the same time Pfizer launched Viagra, another drug-maker released a clinical study

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showing its drug, Pravachol, actually reducing the risk of heart attack and stroke.

How the media treated the two makes for a good biology lesson. Newspapers gave Viagra more coverage than the final episode of "Seinfeld," while Pravachol was harder to find than Jimmy Hoffa. Without a doubt, there are some body parts that are more newsworthy than others.

Perhaps this is because most newspaper editors are men; perhaps this is because the news was released during the testosterone-laced Final Four weekend. More likely, however, it is because here in the Jerry Springer '90s, sex sells better than health.

Viagra is a wonderful drug. It will cure impotence. This will make 20 million men happy. This will make 20 million women even happier.

But impotence is not fatal. It may be ego-crushing. It may be relationship-threatening. But is it not life-threatening. A serious impotence problem will find you deep in the therapy process. A serious heart problem will find you deep in the ground. Stroke happens to be the third leading cause of death in the world and the leading cause of disability.

Pravachol, by Bristol-Myers Squibb, has just been approved by the FDA as the first drug of its kind to reduce stroke or heart attacks in people with normal cholesterol levels. A quick and admittedly unscientific survey showed newspapers and television stations in major cities snubbing this story, while going positively bonkers over a cure for impotence. Front page headlines. Color-graphics. You'd think World War II had ended all over again.

Why the dramatically different treatment? Well, let's be honest. The Viagra story conjures up images of 20 to 30 million couples happily hopping into the sack after a long drought. The Pravachol story is only about lots of people with normal cholesterol not having strokes or heart attacks.

It's titillation over fibrillation. Monica Lewinsky wouldn't be a household name if she'd given President Clinton a cardiogram in the Oval Office. Sharon Stone might not be a star, if she had flashed her ventricle in "Basic Instinct."

In the space war between Viagra and Pravachol, score one for the penis, and zippo for the heart.

Okay, here's another angle for science and health reporters who missed the boat on stroke prevention and are eager to write still more about a cure for impotence. Maybe Bristol and Pfizer should join forces and see what happens to test groups of men who take both drugs together. Sex has got to be better for men who aren't worried about stroking out in the act.

Larry Amoros has written for Rosie O'Donnell and a number of off-Broadway shows.