

POPULARITY OF PROPOXYPHENE

Mr. Chairman, in your letter of invitation you asked me to comment on the reasons for the sustained popularity of propoxyphene as an analgesic in view of its limited effectiveness. The answer to this question is complex and involves a number of factors.

First, I would point out that a significant number of people--typically 30-35 percent--in clinical trials on analgesics obtain pain relief from a placebo. Recent research suggests that this placebo response is due to activation within the brain of the same neural receptors that are affected by narcotics. The pain relief obtained is just as real, and may be just as great in many instances, as that provided by drugs. The placebo response may be enhanced by encouragement from the prescribing physician. Thus, any prescription analgesic is likely to offer pain relief to the many people who tend to be placebo responders--even if its inherent effectiveness is minimal.

Second, by far the most popular propoxyphene-containing products are those combinations containing aspirin, phenacetin or acetaminophen in addition to propoxyphene. They are thus clearly effective products even though the contribution of their propoxyphene component may be relatively small.

Third, until recently propoxyphene has been viewed by the medical profession as a relatively safe analgesic. It does not carry the risks of serious gastro-intestinal bleeding associated with aspirin, the liver damage associated with overdoses of acetaminophen, or the kidney damage associated with phenacetin.